

A MOST UNLIKELY
RETROTHAL
ALICE
KIRKS

A Most Unlikely Betrothal

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

ALICE KIRKS

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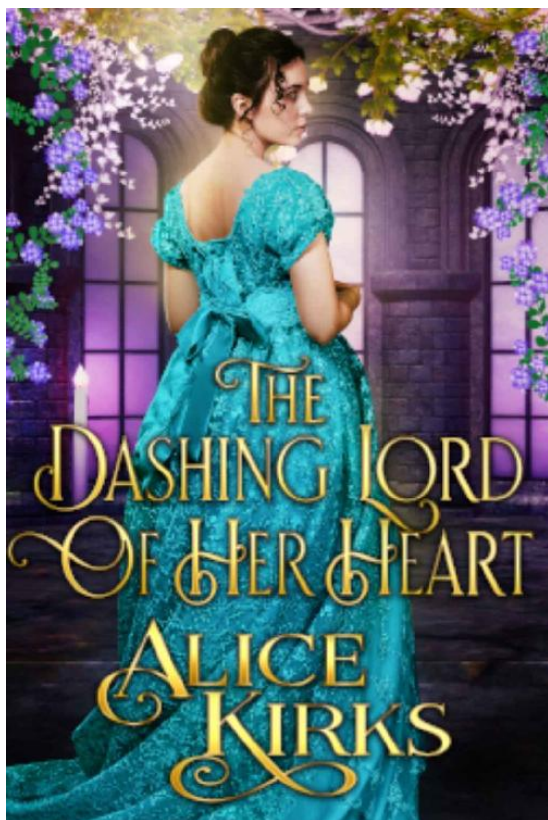
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A Most Unlikely Betrothal

Introduction

Treated like an uncomely and social pariah, Sophia Emley has resigned herself to spinsterhood at the age of twenty-two. Her life takes an abrupt turn though when the handsome Richard Hatherton, Earl of Brittingham, mistakes Sophia for her prettier sister and kisses her in the shadows. Unbeknownst to them, their kiss was witnessed, and in an instant, a great scandal ensues...

How will Sophia feel upon hearing that the only way to clear her name is to marry a man she dislikes?

When Richard finds out that Sophia is now his wife-to-be, he cannot imagine his life by her side. However, he soon realises that there is so much more to his fiancée than what meets the eye, finding himself unable to stop thinking about her unique beauty and intelligence. From that moment on, he is determined to make her see that he is more worthy of her attention and make up for his regretful mistake. Will Richard manage to charm Sophia and prove deserving of her love?

Could he really compensate for such a rocky start and earn her trust?

While Sophia and Richard's mutual love and admiration grow, Sophia's guilt tied to marrying her sister's beau lies heavily on her

chest. More than that, society's criticism continues challenging their decision to unite their lives and hearts... Could these threatening obstacles cost the happiness both Sophia and Richard deserve? Will Sophia and Richard fight for their deep feelings, or will their romance collapse under society's weight?

Chapter 1

How many people did it take to ruin a ball? Any number that had made it a ball in the first place! Blowing out a puff of air that was probably mingled with the breath of hundreds more about her, Sophia struggled not to look too bored. It was only out of affection for Aunt Caroline that Sophia agreed to come in the first place.

"I do not think I agreed," she muttered plaintively.

"Still complaining?" Elizabeth asked, giving her a sideways glance before returning to the scene beyond her. "Do cheer up, Sophia. You're draining all the excitement just like those horrible creatures you spoke about last night."

"Vampires?"

"Yes," the younger sister affirmed. "You're behaving just like a vampire."

"I am not draining the life force of anyone in this room," Sophia countered. "'Tis only you who complains of it. I promised Mama and Papa that I would guard you against unwanted male attention, and that is what I shall do."

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and fiddled with the deep brown curls framing her face, her body brimming with barely-contained eagerness. Sophia knew her sister's slight annoyance at her was no match for the anticipation reflected in her hazel eyes.

Shaking her head, Sophia sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. It was not the stance of a young lady, but a bored woman who wanted to go home, remove her hideous gown, and find a lovely spot in the library to read, study something, or perhaps take Freki and Geri for a walk if Clive hadn't already done so.

Sweeping her gaze through the room, Sophia observed each guest that caught her eye. Some she recognised, while others were mere strangers to her. It was no surprise that most were people she did not know, because Sophia wasn't interested in knowing them. Aunt Caroline, or Lady Smethwick as others knew her, knew a great many people and enjoyed throwing balls and parties to bring everyone together like one big, happy family.

Sophia found it naïve of her aunt to assume that people got along simply because they spent a lot of time together at social events. Balls were notorious for scandals to originate, gossip to spread, and friends or enemies to be created; just because all was done with an air of propriety did not take away from the lack of familial ties between guests—even those who were related turned on each other at some point, especially in the grasp of greed and power.

Sophia was only twenty-two, but she had been watching and listening for so long that she felt she knew everything she needed to know about people. What else could she have done when she was nothing but a wallflower? Perhaps worse. The only reason why people knew she existed was that Elizabeth was beautiful, and Sophia had to follow her everywhere like some unwanted shadow.

Sophia jumped when her sister's hand smacked her arm and grabbed it, her grip tight.

“He's here,” she gasped, her voice almost breathy.

Sophia followed Elizabeth's gaze, finally landing on a fair head that was already surrounded by pressing bodies despite his arrival likely being less than a minute ago. She presumed that was what one got when they were considered the most handsome man in England.

“What am I supposed to do about Lord Brittingham's presence?” Sophia asked, removing her sister's grip. “You are the one who is enamoured with him.”

Elizabeth's cheeks grew bright pink. “I know not what you mean.”

“Of course not,” Sophia replied, her tone sarcastic.

“I do not,” Elizabeth insisted.

Sophia turned her whole body towards her sister, giving her raised eyebrows. “Is this one of those times when I should take your word for it despite knowing the truth? It wouldn't be the first time you have told me to turn a blind eye, but the last time ended in my scolding. Papa expects me to watch over you, Elizabeth, to be the bigger sister. I cannot do that if you keep putting yourself in compromising situations.”

Last year, Elizabeth had fancied herself in love with a young man whom their parents did not approve of, and an elopement had been planned because Elizabeth couldn't live without him. Their father found out about the plan from one of their servants and stopped the

elopement well before Elizabeth could gather her belongings and slip out in the dead of night.

Sophia had been reprimanded in Elizabeth's stead and blamed for not taking better care of her sister—if Sophia had done so, then the young man would not have seduced Elizabeth into running away. It didn't matter that Sophia had been visiting her aunt when this had taken place. Thankfully, not many people had found out about the failed elopement because both families had managed to squash the rumours. It helped that no one would think that Elizabeth could ever put a foot out of place.

Her sister's cheeks went from pink to red in the space of a few seconds. "You will never allow me to forget that, will you?"

"Not if you wish to make the same mistake again."

"Do not ruin my life because you do not have one."

Sophia's chest tightened for just a moment before the heavy pressure of pain eased. She turned away from her sister and focused on the guests, willing herself not to cry. What Elizabeth said was true enough; Sophia did not have the wonderful life that Elizabeth lived—but only in the social sense, for she had what mattered: her animals, books, best friend, and family. She didn't need the acceptance of others.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Sophia," Elizabeth cried, drawing nearer to her. "I didn't mean that. Sometimes I say things when I'm angry, but I do not mean them."

"Tis fine."

"No, it's not. Please forgive me."

Sophia wanted to wrap her anger around herself and shut her sister out, but when she felt Elizabeth's hand on her own, she turned her head and saw the sheen of tears in the young woman's eyes. Sophia did love her, and for all Elizabeth's flaws, she knew that her sister loved her, too.

"I forgive you."

Elizabeth's smile lit up her face, making her prettier, if that was possible. "Thank you, Saffi."

Sophia grinned at the use of her childhood nickname. "You haven't used that in some time."

"I know, but I hurt my sister, and I feel like that little girl seeking your approval again." Elizabeth removed her hand and dipped her head. "Sometimes, I think beauty can be a curse to the one who wields it. Everyone treats me differently, and it's a heady feeling. I'm afraid I'll become so accustomed to using it that I'll forget that you're my sister and hurt the only one who truly knows and loves me despite my flaws."

Sophia could see the little girl who had followed her around and mimicked everything she did shining in her sister's eyes. Though they were three years apart, they had been inseparable almost from the day

of Elizabeth's birth, quickly becoming the kind of sisters that everyone wished to have and be.

That all came to an eventual end when Elizabeth started changing in physical appearance. She had always been a pretty child, but when she grew to womanhood, she became beautiful and caught the eye of any person who happened to see her.

On the other hand, Sophia's plain looks never blossomed. Her lips were a tad too large for her heart-shaped face, her nose leaned towards something between a button and snub nose, and her cheeks carried a smattering of freckles that no amount of staying out of the sun or beauty creams could hide.

Sophia's best features were her brown doe eyes and her thick and wavy waist-length hair that gleamed like brushed copper under sunlight. It was more of a chestnut colour when contained in the hairstyle she had chosen tonight, but when let loose, it released the reddish strands that Elizabeth did not have in her hair.

Not that it was much consolation to have something better than Elizabeth—Sophia wasn't the petty or jealous type anyway. Still, whenever she took down her hair and combed it before bed, there was some little satisfaction that she had something beautiful about her.

"I always taught you that humility was better than any other virtue," said Sophia. "Practice more of that, and you will never fall prey to the charms of your physical beauty."

Elizabeth sighed and nodded, her exaggerated curls dangling around her face. "Yes, I remember your teachings, each and every one of them. If only I could recall them when everyone treats me like I'm

better than most. It's difficult to remain humble when people shower you with compliments and put you on a pedestal. I am only human, Saffi.

Such things can go to one's head and permanently change their own opinion of themselves. Look at Prinny—he is an overweight, none-too-handsome Prince Regent, but he believes the entire country owes him a favour because of his position. Had he been anything but King George's son, he would not have such a swollen head."

Sophia had to laugh. "Do not let anyone who loves the Prince Regent hear you say that. It's near blasphemy."

"But it's true," Elizabeth insisted. "Everyone thinks so. But if he had looked like Richard..." The young woman's cheeks held a faint blush. "I mean, he would be better had he been more handsome and had less of a gut."

"That's a matter of opinion. Looks do not maketh the man, but a first impression can destroy him in the eyes of others," Sophia said, a little gravely. She took a breath to clear her head. "When will you allow names on your dance card?"

Elizabeth drew out said card. "I have several already. You were with Aunt Caroline when it began to fill with partners."

Of course it did. Sophia was informally known as Elizabeth's guard. No one could simply approach her and strike up a conversation unless Sophia deemed them acceptable. It was for her sister's own good as her intelligence and common sense tended to drop once a stunning man smiled her way. Sophia didn't have that problem because no man had ever looked at her with interest. It was both a curse and a

blessing.

Noticing that there were two spaces left on her sister's dance card, Sophia was about to ask Elizabeth why when the answer came to her: her sister had kept them for Richard.

"Oh, Lizzy," she groaned. "I think this has gone on far enough. The man hasn't agreed to formally court you, and yet you keep a light burning for him. Why? He is the biggest flirt I have ever had the misfortune to know."

"That is only because you do not know him," Elizabeth argued. "Richard is sweet and caring. He cannot help that he is beautiful."

"I suppose he cannot help his ego either," Sophia muttered under her breath.

Sophia had met Richard on a few occasions, and he had snubbed her more times than she cared to count. Elizabeth had caught his attention and likely now had a forbidden relationship hidden away from disapproving eyes.

Why didn't the man just come to their father and ask to court Elizabeth? Why the secrecy? Sophia had a feeling her sister had met with Richard on the occasions she had not accompanied Elizabeth. Their mother was not as observant as Sophia and far too trusting of her youngest daughter.

"Would you get me something to drink?" Elizabeth asked.

“Now? But you've already had some wine.”

“I know. Perhaps some champagne?”

Sophia narrowed her eyes. “You do not like the taste of champagne.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said again. “But apparently Aunt Caroline has started to import a special kind from France. An exclusive champagne, if you will. I wish to try it—you should as well.”

Why would her sister recommend alcohol when Elizabeth knew that Sophia did not like the taste? The few times that Sophia had drunk any alcohol it had either given her a headache or a stomach ache. Tea, milk, and water were Sophia's preferred beverages. Fortunately, Aunt Caroline knew of Sophia's aversion and provided her with something to keep her hydrated.

“I do not wish to be ill,” Sophia simply said.

Elizabeth sighed in frustration, but Sophia could have sworn it was tinged with desperation.

“Please, Sophia. It's just one drink.”

One drink, and then what? Why did Sophia feel that her sister was trying to get rid of her?

"Very well," Sophia capitulated, knowing that her sister would remain persistent. "I shall not belong."

"There is no need to rush," Elizabeth assured her. "You still have to walk through throngs of people."

If Sophia hadn't been suspicious before, she was now.

"I will not be long," she promised, and began to make her way through the crowd.

What was Elizabeth up to now? Things would have been so much easier if Aunt Caroline had not made the special request that Sophia attend the ball. The Viscountess of Smethwick was well aware that Sophia hated these events and never felt comfortable with them.

"Mama should be watching Lizzy, not I," she complained under her breath.

Both her parents were occupied while Sophia played companion and guard; Mama was currently gossiping with a few of her friends, and Papa was likely playing cards in another room.

It wasn't fair.

Sophia moved past guests that barely noticed her, and that was fine. Better to be ignored than given unwanted attention.

“Sophia, dear,” her aunt called somewhere to her left.

Sophia turned to her with some reluctance. Aunt Caroline was always trying to assimilate her into society, to show Sophia that she could be part of it if only she would enjoy herself. After three years, it had become tiresome. The Viscountess was standing with a young man of perhaps twenty-five years who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but by her side.

“Yes, Aunt Caroline?”

“Have you met Lord Henderson?”

The man's eyes flicked to hers, showing his discomfort. Sophia inwardly sighed, wondering how to get out of dancing with an unwilling man. She had no doubts that Aunt Caroline would try to force a dance out of Lord Henderson. Why did her aunt not understand that men were not interested in her?

“No, I have not had the privilege. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lord Henderson. Unfortunately, I cannot stay too long, Aunt Caroline. Would you please excuse me?”

Sophia thought she heard the man give a sigh of relief, but that could have just been her past experiences narrating this one.

"Where are you off to, dear?" her aunt asked, sounding a little strained.

Perhaps Sophia had been a little on the rude side by barely giving Lord Henderson much attention, but she tired of seeing the same look of rejection on every man who was presented to her. Besides, Lord Henderson seemed happy to see her go.

"Elizabeth wasn't feeling well, so I decided to get her something to drink," Sophia lied, her right eye twitching.

"But she looks fine now," her aunt said, her lightly lined brow creasing with puzzlement. "She is dancing with Lord Brittingham."

Sophia turned, sucking in her cheeks and biting softly on the flesh. She had expected her sister to do something, but to dance with the Earl mere moments after leaving her? It stung of insolence.

"I suppose she has regained her strength," Sophia said tightly.

"Then perhaps you can speak to Lord Henderson for a little while," her aunt suggested while not giving any options. "He is also interested in customs and traditions of other nations. You'll have a lot to talk about. Will you excuse me? I think I've just seen someone I know."

Considering that the Viscountess had invited all the guests tonight, she would undoubtedly know everyone to some extent. Sophia cringed at her aunt's lack of subtlety and could only imagine what Lord Henderson might be thinking.

There must be nothing worse than being left with an unwanted woman. He must wish he was anywhere else at this very moment.

However, Sophia knew the man would be polite and make small conversation before taking the way out that she would provide.

Lord Henderson watched, helpless, as Lady Smethwick all but ran away. When the Viscountess was well and truly out of sight, he slowly turned to Sophia. One would think she was a leper from the look in the man's eyes, but when one was socially inadequate and unattractive, they might as well have been a leper.

Sophia felt hurt well up in her. She didn't deserve to be looked upon as something unwanted, and she certainly didn't deserve the title of England's Least Eligible Gentle Lady.

It had come about when Sophia had been socially introduced three years ago. All manner of things had gone wrong for her, from wardrobe malfunctions to stepping on dance partners' toes and awkward social moments. These had all plagued Sophia until most wished to keep away from her.

As her thoughts centred upon the unfairness of the entire evening, her anger grew. Welcoming the emotion, she plastered on a smile that may have resembled a sneer and tilted her head.

"Are you enjoying yourself, Lord Henderson?" she asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

Oh, how polite he was. If only his face matched his words. Sophia didn't want to make small talk, but neither did she want to come away as Poor Sophia the Wallflower.

Watching him look away, Sophia followed his gaze and found it resting on her sister's pretty head.

“Will you ask me if my sister's dance card is full now or later?” she asked bluntly.

The man whipped his head back to her, casting a wary look at her. “What do you mean?”

“Come, come now, my lord. We should dispense with the preliminaries and get straight to the point. Perhaps you didn't think that you would ask me, but now that I'm here, I'm certain you're curious to know if you have a chance to dance with Elizabeth. You certainly wouldn't be the first gentleman to use me to get to my sister.”

Sophia's voice sounded a tad harsher than she had expected, so she tried to soften the quip with a smile. She might as well have smiled at a wall for all the good it did.

“I've heard some rumours about you, Miss Emley,” the man said. “I didn't know they were true until this very moment. A woman in your position would do wise to sweeten her tongue if you ever hope to

marry.”

Rumours about her? Sophia wasn't surprised.

“I presume that you do not enjoy my frankness—how disappointing. However, I will be polite enough to say that you have no chance of dancing with Elizabeth tonight; her dance card is full. I hope you have a splendid evening, my lord.”

Sophia gave an melodramatic curtsy and walked off. Perhaps she had been rude, but it was better to strike first than allow others to take the first strike. Sophia didn't want to end the evening wishing she had defended herself more. That had happened many times before, and she had grown tired of lying awake in bed overthinking about who said what, and why she had just stood there and listened to it all.

What should she do now? There was no longer a reason to get the champagne, and Sophia did not want to return to her seat.

“Isn't that Sophia Emley?” a woman's voice piped up from somewhere nearby.

Sophia didn't turn in the direction her name came from, but pretended to be looking for someone in the crowd.

“Yes, it is,” another woman said. “Don't they call her Poor Sophia the Wallflower?”

The first woman laughed. "Can you blame them? It looks like she dug up that dress from who knows where. She should ask her sister for beauty advice. She certainly needs it!"

"I feel sorry for her," the second woman said with some pity. "What woman wants to be rejected during her Season?"

"Rejected? She wasn't even considered! Apparently, she made all the faux pas that one could make and earned a reputation for herself. She had just as much opportunity as we do to make a good impression, and she wasted it. It is sad, but it's reality. No man wants a wife who cannot fit in. She could at least smile and stop looking like a mean troll."

The women eventually made off, but Sophia found she couldn't move. She had heard it all before, but did it ever get easier? Sophia furiously blinked away the hot, unwelcome tears and pushed past surprised guests, trying to flee the room.

After what felt like an eternity, Sophia reached the double doors, breathing a ragged sigh of relief when she stepped outside. Where should she go? It took her a moment of indecision to realise that the library would be her safest option for the time being, but it would only be a matter of time before the men started spilling into the room for cigars and brandy.

Hurrying to the room, Sophia slumped against the door to close it, knocking her head on the wood a little harder than she intended. She rubbed it as she pushed away, making her way to the bookshelves and stopping at random.

Uncle Arthur kept a wide array of books and was as much a collector

as was Sophia's father. However, unlike her father, the Viscount could afford to fill his vast library with first editions, rare books, and even the dark arts.

"I don't think I could read in here," she said to herself. "And I have at least three or four hours before Elizabeth will want to go home."

Their parents were never mindful of when Sophia wished to go home because she never did anything but sit and watch guests or guard her sister. Elizabeth was the one with the chance to marry well.

"I'm sure they'll be over the moon once they know that Lord Brittingham is interested," Sophia muttered, trailing her hand over a low bookshelf.

That was, if he was sincerely interested—there was no telling the intentions of that flirt. Sophia didn't trust him at all.

After some time, she picked a book and decided that reading under the night sky seemed like a good idea. At least she would be alone and not bump into any people. She knew just the spot she would go to, but she needed an oil lamp if she intended to actually see anything; it was a rather cloudy night, and only bits of the moon could be seen. Sophia looked around her and spotted an one with enough fuel to keep burning for an hour or two.

She lit it with a candle, tucked her chosen book under her arm, and set out for the garden through the back way. None of the guests were milling around there as it was closer to the servants' quarters. If they wanted to walk through Aunt Caroline's garden, then they could take the doors leading out from the ballroom, but Sophia doubted anyone would venture too far.

As she made her way to her favourite spot—the tree with the exposed roots where one person could comfortably snuggle in—she wondered why her aunt and uncle had so many Greek statues dotted about the place. As far as she was concerned, it took away from the beauty of nature.

"Each to their own, I guess," she mumbled.

The night air was still until an odd wind blew through and snuffed out her lamp. Sophia was plunged into the shadows, made worse by the Aphrodite statue she was sitting below. Groaning at her bad luck, she thought to retreat indoors when she heard twigs breaking. Her heart stuttered. Her eyes grew wide, then narrowed in the direction of the sound. She glared into the darkness, trying to see what had disturbed her.

"It must be a critter," she whispered.

She half-expected the rustle of leaves and grass to prove that a tiny creature was scurrying away, but what Sophia heard next sent shivers down her spine: footsteps were slowly, but surely, approaching her.

She tried to call out and demand to know who it was, but her tongue felt like cotton. All she could do was make odd sounds that seemed silly to her, so she stopped. A dark shadow appeared in front of her, and Sophia could just make out the silhouette of a man. It grew closer, and despite her mind screaming at her to move, her body didn't budge. The figure loomed over her and took Sophia in his arms. Sophia was stunned; she couldn't even struggle!

"I'm so glad you came to meet me," the man said. "I couldn't wait until I could have you to myself."

The voice sounded so familiar, but Sophia's brain was a little too busy feeling frightened to be concerned about who it was.

"I must tell you that no other woman has made me feel this way," the man continued. "I knew there was something special about you from the moment I first saw you."

Sophia would have laughed if she wasn't so scared. Did this man think that such words worked on women? Clearly so.

"I fear I cannot hold myself anymore," he confessed, bringing Sophia closer to him.

What on earth was he about to do? Goodness! Why couldn't she move? Sophia looked up in horror as the man's face grew closer to her until she could feel his breath on her cheeks.

A sliver of moonlight suddenly illuminated the area around Sophia, giving her a quick glimpse of Lord Brittingham before he kissed her. It was a brief one, but enough to send tingles right through Sophia's body. She swayed when the man took a quick step away, blinking her eyes repeatedly as she saw the look of surprise on the Earl's face.

"Miss Emley?" he cried aghast.

Hearing his voice was like taking an icy dip in the Atlantic Ocean. She gasped, her hand covering her mouth as her mind grasped the situation. Sophia took one step back and then another, dropping both her book and the lamp before lifting up her dress and making a mad dash for the house.

Chapter 2

Richard was relieved his parents decided to stay at home this evening because he didn't want any interference from them. Lately, the Duke and Duchess had become suspicious of the attention he gave Elizabeth Emley and had asked him of his intentions. Richard wasn't sure what they were just yet, but he certainly enjoyed being around the beautiful woman.

Elizabeth was easily the loveliest woman of the Season and had caught his eye at the very first ball his aunt, the Countess of Danbridge, had given. She had seemingly floated into the room wearing a white silk dress with a touch of pink at the waist and sleeves.

Richard had immediately stopped talking to his friend and gazed at the stunning vision until his eyes fell upon a plainer woman behind her. He had recognised the woman as England's Least Eligible Gentle Lady and wondered what she was doing with someone so beautiful.

At first, Richard had assumed they were friends until he picked up on the physical similarities between the women. Their colouring, face structure, height and weight had been similar, but that's where it ended. Elizabeth had a more refined, gentle face that was quite angelic, but Sophia was so nondescript she could easily be mistaken for a servant—if not for the proud way she carried herself.

Richard didn't know what the woman had to be proud of. Her Season had been a disaster, and she had become the one woman no one wanted at their social events unless they really needed to have her there. He sometimes felt sorry for the woman, but Sophia Emley didn't make life any easier by having a sharp tongue and proving she was more intelligent than any man who dared to challenge her.

“She needs to learn to pick her battles,” he murmured as he stared at the approaching house.

Richard was running late tonight, but he had planned it so. He wanted to ensure that Elizabeth had arrived before him so he wouldn't have to wait for her. Although he was interested in the younger Emley sister, Richard didn't like any woman to think that he was so enamoured with them that his life centred around them. That would break the stipulation in his rule book of dealing with women.

Richard and his best friend, Nicholas, had come up with it several years ago when women began to notice them as something more than just cute little boys. Hearing about men being trapped into marriage, falling into scandalous situations, and a host of other problems led them to create a handbook that would protect them from unwanted attention and consequences.

Despite this, he had broken a few of his own rules where Elizabeth was concerned. What was it about gorgeous women that made a man lose his common sense? They had had their first chaste kiss on their fourth meeting, and had snuck away several times to spend time together. He felt like he was following her around like a puppy by finding out which events she was most likely to attend.

Brushing his hands through his fine, pale hair, Richard hoped he would have more sense tonight. He laughed, knowing that he planned to kiss the pretty woman again. That's if he got the chance to do so; Sophia would undoubtedly stick to her sister like honey on fur.

His carriage slowed until it came to a stop at the front steps of the Smethwick Manor. Huge stone lions crouched on either side of the

steps, ready to pounce on any unsuspecting guests and make a meal of them. Richard knew the Viscount was obsessed with cats of all sorts, lions in particular.

Lord Smethwick had several taxidermied animals in his study, most of them imported from Africa or Asia. Although Richard liked to hunt with the best of them, he wasn't particularly keen on keeping animals like some sort of trophy on his walls. It just seemed too gruesome for him.

A footman opened his door, waiting for Richard to walk down the portable steps before closing the door and sitting beside the driver. After a brief announcement of his arrival, Richard entered the ballroom and was immediately met with several people who all wished to speak with him. This was the case wherever Richard went.

He knew it had nothing to do with him personally but everything to do with his wealth and social status. After all, he was set to inherit a dukedom, an inheritance that easily made him the most eligible bachelor for miles around. Of course, his fair looks did help. Richard knew that his blond hair, light green eyes, full lips and dimple on his left cheek was enough to make any warm-blooded woman swoon.

He had been likened to Adonis, a fallen angel, and all sorts of creatures that bore great beauty with the dangerous power of entrancing masses with the mere crook of a finger. Richard didn't feel dangerous, but people's reactions to him made him appear so.

"How are you, Lord Brittingham?" a man asked. "We despaired of you ever arriving. You're rather late."

Many uttered the same sentiments, making Richard smile. He turned

to the man, recognising him as Adam Leech.

“I had some things to do,” Richard answered. “But I'm here now.”

“We're so glad that you are,” a pretty brunette said. “This ball would have been boring without you.”

“I doubt that, Cassandra,” said Richard. “There are plenty of amusements to keep one occupied. Surely you do not need me to keep everyone entertained?”

She blushed, the faint pink hue colouring her neck as well. "But none so interesting as you, my lord."

Cassandra coloured so quickly, but that didn't lessen the blatant flirtation. Richard hadn't come here to flirt with anyone; he came here to see Elizabeth. He gave the woman a harmless grin and gazed over the crowd. He was tall enough to see over the heads of most of the people present, but he still couldn't see Elizabeth. She had to be here; he was sure of it. Perhaps she was sitting? In that case, he needed the sea of bodies to part. If he were Moses, he could lift a staff and command them, but where was a God-powered staff when he needed one?

“Looking for someone?” a man asked at his elbow.

Richard spared him a brief glance because he already knew who it was. “How long have you been here, Nick?”

“Long enough to know where the person you're looking for is sitting right now,” his friend replied with a knowing grin.

Richard ignored the laughing eyes. “Where?”

“With her sister. Four o'clock on your right.”

Richard groaned. Her sister? “I should have known,” he said in hushed tones. Richard didn't want the other guests hanging around him to know what was going on, but they looked curious as he bent his head towards Nicholas. “How am I going to see her now?”

“Patience, I guess. Miss Emley cannot sit by her sister for the whole night.”

Richard snorted. “If that's what you think, then you do not know the woman well.”

“And you do?” asked Nicholas, his one eyebrow raised.

“Let's just say I've encountered the woman more times than I care to recall.”

At first, he hadn't known her name but the two nicknames people had given her. It was only when he saw Elizabeth and found out her name did he realise Sophia was an Emley. Richard had quickly established that he would see more of the woman, but he didn't know that she

would make it so challenging to talk to Elizabeth.

"What will you do now?" Nicholas inquired. "I know you wish to see her alone, although I think that is a foolish idea. You could get caught, and that will ultimately cause problems."

"I'm aware of that, but we've been careful. I like Elizabeth very much—more than I've ever liked any other woman,—but I'm not prepared to settle down just yet."

Although, if he was to hazard a guess about the perfect woman for him, it would likely be Elizabeth. Richard was still wary about committing himself to one woman, but she made him feel like he could go down the marriage road and be happy about it. He paused at the thought. Did he really mean it? Perhaps not, but he was certainly closer to the idea of marriage now than he had been prior to meeting Elizabeth.

As though they knew that he wished to see the woman who held his affections, the crowd cleared a path that gave him a perfect view of the woman he had come to see. For some reason, her beauty didn't make Richard catch his breath tonight, but he didn't worry about that. Elizabeth Emley was still beautiful, and he liked her. What more did he need?

"I think she knows you're here," Nicholas commented as they moved further into the crowd.

"I'm not surprised. Everyone made it too obvious to miss."

Elizabeth wasn't looking at him, but Richard could tell by the tension in her body that she was aware of his close proximity. However, she wasn't the only one who had noticed his arrival. Sophia looked annoyed and seemed to want to be anywhere else but here. Richard didn't understand the woman.

He had tried everything he could think of to make her like him, from being charming to friendly, but none of it had worked on Sophia. Why? Was she immune to him? Apparently so, but Richard didn't like the idea. If he married Elizabeth by some chance, how would his life be with a sister-in-law like Sophia? Granted, he wouldn't have to see much of her, but that wouldn't change that they were related by marriage.

“Guess who is not happy to see you?” Nicholas said with some glee in his voice.

“I resent that you think any of this is amusing,” Richard bit back. “The woman would do better to smile once in a while and stop watching her sister like a hawk. She could take up the position of royal guard she's so good at being protective and watchful.”

“You're just annoyed that there is some woman out there who doesn't like you,” Nicholas returned.

Was that the reason? “You're talking a lot of hogwash. Miss Emley is an annoying woman—why would I want her to like me?”

“Maybe because she is directly tied to the woman you have pursued for the past several weeks? It's only natural to want to be in the good books of your potential in-laws.”

Hearing the hint of marriage coming from his friend gave Richard an unsettled feeling. It had sounded plausible in his head, but he wasn't certain about actually marrying Elizabeth. Perhaps their kiss this evening would give him the answers he wanted.

“I'll give her some credit for her determination to keep her sister from unworthy suitors, since that has cut me a clear path to Elizabeth. But the dislike is mutual; I also don't care for her and merely tolerate her for Elizabeth's sake.”

Richard watched the sisters exchange words before Sophia stood up and walked away. He realised with a jolt that this was his opportunity to speak to Elizabeth. Perhaps she had made a way to see each other.

“I'm going to approach Lizzy while her sister is away,” Richard told his friend.

“Do you think that wise?” Nicholas asked.

“It will just be for one dance. Surely that is allowed?”

“Not in Sophia Emley's book,” Nicholas argued. “She might not be pleased that you waited until her back was turned to ask her sister for a dance.”

Richard gave a gallic shrug. “I'll take my chances.”

He wanted to see Elizabeth and tell her of his plan to meet alone in the garden. He did not need Sophia's interference.

Richard left his friend and made his way to where Elizabeth sat, taking in her demure behaviour, which he knew was for his benefit.

“Good evening, Elizabeth.”

The young woman looked up with surprise, her lips framing an 'o'. “Richard! I didn't know you had arrived.”

That was a lie, but he didn't mind. “Indeed? Well, I noticed you from across the room.”

“You did?” said Elizabeth, barely hiding the smile of pleasure playing about her lips.

“Of course, I did. How can any man not see the most beautiful woman in this room?”

Elizabeth's blush went straight to the roots of her dark hair. “Do not say that, Richard. I cannot be the most beautiful.”

Yet, she knew she was. Richard had come to know Elizabeth well enough to realise that the woman was aware of her beauty and enjoyed the perks that came with it. How did Sophia fare with her sister's popularity? The odd thought cut through Richard's mind,

disturbing him. What did he care what Sophia felt about it? It was none of his business.

Richard noticed Elizabeth was clutching her dance card, giving him an idea. "Do you have any space on there to dance with me? I know that you must have many partners lined up this evening, but I would be beholden to you if you would give a poor man a little time on the floor."

Richard watched the woman's eyes light up. "I would love to dance with you, but let me make sure that I have a set available."

It didn't take the woman long to tell him that she had two spots open. Richard had a feeling they were purposefully left open for him. It worked even better for him that her first dance had yet to be claimed.

"I would be honoured to lead you to the dance floor right now, if you will have me," Richard requested in his most humble voice.

It was part of the charm that he could be both handsome and humble. He held out his hand to Elizabeth, knowing that she would say yes. Some people would think his confidence was a sign of cockiness, but Richard wasn't one to do things unless he was absolutely sure of the outcome. He wasn't an impulsive man and rarely took risks unless he was certain that the consequences would favour him.

Elizabeth put her slender hand in his and stood up. "I would be delighted."

Richard threw her a heart-warming smile and led the willing woman

to the dance floor. He had a moment's doubt about what Sophia might say about taking her sister without asking her permission, but she wasn't Elizabeth's parent, was she? Sophia could only be a year or two older than Elizabeth and wasn't equipped to handle matters of interested men—how could she when she had never had a suitor look her way?

He and Elizabeth soon fell into the dance steps, with the woman putting more gaiety into the dance than Richard felt was necessary. After a moment or two had passed, he launched into his plan, making sure to keep his voice at a minimum. Perhaps asking Elizabeth to sneak off into the garden with him was not the best thing to do while dancing, but it was the only way to ensure that Sophia wouldn't interrupt him before he was done.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured into her ear as they came together. “Would you meet me outside?”

Elizabeth pulled away, startled, swapping places with another woman before coming back to him.

“You wish to meet me outside?”

“Yes, in the garden. I wish to speak with you alone.”

Elizabeth's cheeks pinkened as she moved several steps back, getting into formation with the other women. She lowered her eyes, biting her bottom lip. Would she deny him? She had always seemed eager before. Richard hadn't considered Elizabeth saying no to him, but perhaps he should have.

The dance brought them closer again, but Richard didn't dare say anything for fear of seeming persistent. That was the woman's job, not his. If he appeared persistent, then the woman was certain to expect a proposal on the horizon. However, if they were persistent, he would gently turn them down. It was a win-win situation as far as he was concerned.

Richard had no desire to hurt anyone, and he wasn't the vindictive sort. He preferred to come across as a harmless, flirtatious young Earl who had a smile ready for any woman, even those who disliked him.

"I would like to meet you in the garden," Elizabeth finally said, her voice somewhat breathy.

Richard couldn't resist the mild look of triumph he could feel travel across his features. "Thank you. Will you meet me by the Aphrodite statue in five minutes? You go first once this dance ends, and I'll follow you."

Elizabeth nodded, almost forgetting the next step in the set. She giggled a little as she stumbled, quickly falling into step with the other women. A sense of excitement took hold of Richard. Why did that happen whenever one was about to do something that was not allowed?

It reminded him of the time he had taken his father's favourite horse and phaeton for a spin around London without letting him know. Richard had been a little more careless until some years ago and had taken a bend too sharply. The result was a dislocated shoulder, a destroyed phaeton, and a jittery horse. It was only his title as heir that had kept the Duke from taking a switch to his hide.

Once the music ended, and a little break was called, Richard and Elizabeth drew apart almost immediately. He didn't look to see where she disappeared to as he didn't want to draw attention to them. People were just meant to see that he had danced with her, and that was it. Anything else would invite too many questions.

At times, Richard wondered if he was tampering with Elizabeth's virtue by seeing her alone or sharing a hasty kiss with her, but that was what people who had some affection for each other did, didn't they? Richard had never taken advantage of her and had no wish to do so. It simply wasn't his *modus operandi*.

He moved to get a drink, barely sipping it as he counted down the minutes. When he felt that he had given Elizabeth more than enough time to reach their destination, he placed his drink on the nearest surface and set off after her. Richard wasn't halfway out of the ballroom when he realised that he should probably try another exit. What if someone was watching him and surmised that he was following Elizabeth? The thought was enough to spin him on his heel and take another route to the garden.

He stepped outside and was surprised to see how dark it was ; not an inch of moonlight illuminated the path he needed to take. How had Elizabeth managed it? Perhaps her familiarity with the place was enough for her—it was her aunt and uncle's estate, after all. Richard had also come to the estate several times in the past and knew it enough to note specific markers along the way.

What would he say once he had Elizabeth alone? It wasn't just the lure of a kiss that had sought privacy but a lesser need to divulge his growing feelings for the woman. Richard still wasn't confident about the latter intention as he had never done such a thing, but he couldn't deny that Elizabeth Emley had won his affections.

“Some, not all,” he whispered to himself.

He still needed time to explore what he felt. Nicholas had once said that he knew he had loved Marianne after he had kissed her a second time, which was one of the reasons why Richard felt he needed to kiss Elizabeth. If he had fallen in love with the woman, then he needed to be absolutely sure about it. Hopefully, he wouldn't get his heart broken in the process like his friend did.

The clouds parted enough for some moonlight to filter through and guide his way, but the height of the hedges, trees and statues kept most things in their shadow, including him. Why did the Viscount and Viscountess have so many statues in their garden? A few were fine, but when the number surpassed twenty, it became too much.

Richard spotted the statue he was looking for up ahead, as well as the form of a woman nearing it. He was glad to see that Elizabeth had taken an oil lamp with her, but what was that she had under her arm? A book? Had she brought it while she waited? That was odd, since Elizabeth didn't strike him as a bookish woman. Perhaps her sister, but not her.

Whatever Elizabeth's reasons were for bringing the book, Richard decided that it wasn't important. Nothing mattered more than getting to her, telling her what he felt, and sharing another kiss. He paused, wondering where all this sudden urgency had come from—yes, he wished to be with Elizabeth, but he certainly didn't need to.

Richard shook his head, wondering what had gotten into him. A breeze ruffled his hair, almost teasing it as it passed him and disappeared as quickly as it had come. How strange. He looked ahead and noticed that Elizabeth's lamp had been blown out by the zephyr. No matter— could see where she was.

Not wanting to scare her by coming up from behind, Richard walked around a long hedge until he stood several feet in front of Elizabeth. He could barely see her in the shadows, but they were familiar enough to know each other. As he approached her, Richard watched her shadowed form grow still, as if listening. He paused for just a moment, but a sense of urgency pushed him ahead until he stood before her, still not able to see her face clearly in the shadows. Richard felt himself reach for her, closing his hands around softly rounded arms, and brought her a step closer to him. He hadn't known precisely what he wished to say to Elizabeth, but now his words flowed out of him as though they had been there all along.

"I'm so glad you came to meet me. I couldn't wait until I could have you to myself."

Elizabeth said nothing. Did she want to hear more from him? Richard had no problem doing that because he had something more to say.

"I must tell you that no other woman has made me feel this way. I knew there was something special about you from the moment I first saw you."

That sounded a little trite even to his ears, but that didn't change the fact that he meant every word. Elizabeth didn't pull away, which was a good sign. That encouraged him to do the one thing he had thought about for most of the evening.

"I fear I cannot hold myself anymore," he said, surprised at the intensity of his voice.

He hadn't felt like this the first time he had shared a kiss with her. Richard bent his head towards her and closed his eyes, instinctively knowing that he would land in the right place. He kissed Elizabeth, feeling a pressing warmth travel through his body that wasn't there the first time. Something wasn't right. He abruptly let go of her and stepped away, watching her sway slightly. A streak of moonlight lit up their area enough for Richard to realise he had made a grave mistake.

“Miss Emley?” he said, his voice hoarse with shock and other things that he did not want to think about right now.

Richard heard Sophia gasp, watching her hand go to her mouth as she took several steps back. Finally, she dropped the book and lamp she had been holding, seemingly not bothered by the sound of breaking glass. Richard was worried that she had cut herself and thought to approach her with an apology and a quick observation to see if Sophia had hurt herself, but before he could, the horrified woman picked up her dress, flashing her slender ankles in the process, and ran off towards the house.

Richard had never seen a woman run that fast and would have admired her agility if not for the crashing feeling in his chest that he had just kissed the wrong sister. What the devil was he supposed to do now?

Chapter 3

Sophia didn't stop running until her hand touched the columns of the manor. She collapsed against it, circling her arms around it and holding on for dear life as her heart worked to slow down.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," she said over and over again under her breath.

What had just happened back there? She touched her lips, quickly snatching her hand away when the memory of what had happened mere seconds ago surfaced.

"No!" she cried, her nails gripping the hardness of the columns. "I will not think about such things."

It was simply too shocking and horrifying to recall.

Was it? a voice whispered in her head.

For one intoxicating moment, Sophia had known what it felt to be wanted, but the kiss had not been meant for her. It didn't take a genius to know who Richard had meant to kiss. Embarrassment flooded her senses, making Sophia groan with shame. She touched her head to the cold column, letting its coolness bring down the heat in her face.

This was not supposed to have happened. Reading in the garden had

been meant to be a relaxing activity, something to take her away from the weight of everyone's criticism, but all it had done was land her in trouble. No one could have chosen a more horrendous situation, and all the wishing in the world wasn't going to make it go away.

Sliding to the floor, Sophia tucked her knees and dress underneath her, but kept her brow against the stone. Somebody could come at any moment and see her, but she didn't care; she had other things to worry about, namely what to do about Richard's kiss.

Manic laughter bubbled out of her before she nipped it, pulling her lips in tight. What could she do about it? It had happened; she couldn't take it back.

"I'm sure Lord Brittingham would want to," she muttered darkly.

This was all his fault. If he hadn't been intent upon meeting Elizabeth in the garden and kissing her, this would have never happened. What if Richard had kissed the right person, but someone saw them? Elizabeth's reputation would have been compromised! Sophia's jaw clenched as she welcomed the anger that lashed through her, chasing away her embarrassment. Had the Earl thought about anyone but himself in this plan? What had Elizabeth been thinking by agreeing to see him? Richard had undoubtedly been waiting for her.

"When I see that foolish sister of mine..." Sophia growled, her words soon trailing away when she realised the full severity of her situation.

What was she going to tell Elizabeth? That her older sister had kissed the man she was enamoured with? Groaning, Sophia tapped her head on the column until it hurt a little. She stopped, rubbing the tender area. There would likely be bruising tomorrow, but that was the least

of her worries. There was absolutely no way that she could breathe a word of what happened tonight to anyone.

It would be fine if she could just forget about it and put it behind her, but a small part of her acknowledged that it wouldn't be that easy. The kiss she had shared with Richard had been brief, but powerful enough to make her realise that she was missing out on a lot that many couples got to experience. The spinster life would be a lonely one, but it was all Sophia could have. She had resigned herself to it. There was no use wishing for something that would never happen; this was her fate.

She finally rose with a sigh, only to turn wildly at the familiar snapping of twigs. Sophia tried to search the darkness for a man's form with her back plastered to the column. Had Richard followed her? She squinted into the night a little longer, breathing a sigh of relief when no one appeared. In the back of her mind, Sophia knew that Richard wouldn't be foolish enough to follow her and risk being seen in the open, but stranger things had happened tonight. Well, this was undoubtedly the first and last of such things happening to her. No more night-time garden strolls for her.

But what of the kiss? Could she put that behind her?

“What a question!” she scoffed.

Of course, she could. It had simply been a silly kiss and a brief one at that. There was no need to fret over it because it meant nothing to her. With that, Sophia dusted her dress, smoothed her hair, and squared her shoulders as she returned to the ballroom. It didn't occur to her that Richard would say anything about it because she imagined him to be just as embarrassed and horrified by his mistake. Sophia would certainly never share this information with Elizabeth for fear of hurting her.

If anything, this ordeal had taught her that she would need to keep a closer eye on her little sister. The young woman was walking a road paved with pitfalls that she would be the one to fall into, not Richard. Things were different for men, always—the man would probably get a light scolding while Elizabeth would be labelled a loose woman for allowing a man to take advantage of her. In some way, Sophia was glad that Richard had kissed the wrong person. Her sister had certainly dodged a compromising situation.

Feeling a little better about herself, Sophia entered the ballroom.

* * *

Several Days Later

Sophia looked over her friend's shoulder, shaking her head. "Your French is sloppy, Rose. Your grandfather will not be impressed when he gets your letter."

The woman rolled her eyes and sighed, pushing the paper and pen away. "I'm tired of writing in French, anyway. It was never my strongest language."

"Yet your grandparents are French," Sophia reminded her.

"I know, I know, but I can speak it better than I write it. Not perfectly as you can, but I can speak it. Why must I write in it as well? Why

can't they accept an English letter?"

Sophia gave her a side look. "Do I need to answer that?"

Rose's grandparents were not fond of the English, but it had less to do with the ongoing war between England and France and more to do with personal issues. Apparently, Rose's father had 'stolen' her mother from the man her parents had chosen for her, a good Frenchman they had known for years.

Take that and add it to the ongoing animosity between the two countries, and they have themselves a feud. The only English person allowed to see the angry grandparents was Rose, so it was vital that her letters were written in perfect French. Sophia didn't understand why Rose's mother had not tried harder to instil the language in her daughter.

"Do not give me a lecture, Soph," Rose begged. "I've just about had all I can take this week."

The woman pushed away from the writing desk and flung herself on a lover's seat, draping her arm across her eyes. Sophia knew what that meant.

"What did your mother say this time?" she asked.

"What didn't she say?" Rose said with a slight choke.

“Oh, Rose,” said Sophia as she went to kneel by her best friend. “I’m sorry that you have to endure so much.”

Rose rolled her head to look at her. “No more than you have to. I suppose we both have our little family issues.”

Laughing a little, Sophia rested her brow on Rose's shoulder. They were both not enough for their families, not pretty enough, not obedient enough, not submissive enough—not anything! It didn't matter that they were both intelligent and loved their families without reservation. What mattered was their inability to bring any pride to their parents.

At twenty-six and unmarried, Rose was a spinster. Her father affectionately referred to her as his plain little sparrow, but if only he knew how much the nickname hurt his daughter. Sophia wasn't a stranger to nicknames, so she felt her friend's pain.

“We can only forgive their narrow mindedness and move on,” Sophia said, her head still resting on Rose's shoulder.

“Can we do so for the rest of our lives? I will never see the look of pride in my mother's eyes, and you will never be as important as Elizabeth in your mother's eyes. Sometimes, I used to envy your bond with your sister and wished for one of my own, but when Elizabeth blossomed...”

Rose didn't need to say any more. Sophia had been pushed to the side to put her sister on a pedestal so high that no one could reach it. Her mother had her consolation prize for birthing such a plain daughter, and it had come in the beauty of her youngest daughter.

"Why talk about something so depressing?" Sophia asked. "We're together, and that is all that matters. I laid awake in bed this morning, thinking about our future and wondering if we had one. Spinsters are usually pushed to the back of society and only called upon when a favour is needed. I don't want to be the sort of person that runs to whoever needs my help just because I supposedly have nothing better to do."

Sophia moved away as Rose carelessly flipped over, nearly knocking over a nearby vase. It rocked for a bit before settling back in place with a dull thud.

"Sorry," Rose muttered, biting her lower lip.

"Just keep those feet and hands in, and no one will get hurt," Sophia replied with a chuckle.

Rose was a bit of a walking hazard and tended to have all sorts of accidents. It was amazing that she never seemed to get seriously hurt with her clumsiness. The woman made a point of sitting up and crossing her legs in the Indian fashion before folding her arms under her bosom.

"Better?"

"Better than knocking over one of Mama's favourite vases. I do not think she has quite forgiven you for her great grandmother's bust yet."

Rose winced. "Do not remind me. Instead, tell me what plan is circling in your head—what sort of adventure do you see in our future?"

"I don't know if I would call it an adventure, more a 'stand against everything people assume spinster stands for'."

"You do know that you are not quite a spinster yet?"

"Let's not argue over trivial matters. We both know that love is not something we can look forward to, and perhaps that is a blessing—no heartache, jealousy, pain, suffering, or envy...I would say that is a good enough incentive to welcome spinsterhood with open arms."

Rose appeared doubtful. "Forgive me for not sharing your sentiments. Perhaps once you get to my age, you'll realise that even a bad marriage is better than being alone."

Sophia's eyes widened, hardly able to believe her friend had just admitted that. "I am confident that there are women who would rather be single than go through an unhappy marriage. You only feel that way because of your latest argument with your mother. You always feel worse after one of those."

"Can you blame me?" Rose asked with despair clouding her usually sweet voice.

Rose's voice had that quality of sounding like fresh summer rain on a dry riverbed. People were drawn to her voice but were soon repelled by her lack of beauty and nerves that made her blurt out anything at the most inopportune moments. In short, Rose was just as socially

awkward as Sophia.

"No," Sophia began, "but I will if you let it spoil your mood any further than it has. We have a whole day to talk to our hearts' content before your driver comes to take you home. Would you really spend our time feeling sad and sorry for something you know you cannot change?"

Both Sophia and Rose understood that they could do nothing about their parents. It wasn't that they were not loved by them, but they simply did not meet the standard their parents craved. For better or worse, their parents were controlled by what society deemed was worthy or beautiful, nought else mattered. Accepting that and moving on was their first step towards healing two broken hearts.

"You are right, Soph," Rose agreed, loosening her body until her feet unfolded and her head fell back. "I don't want you to be right, but you are. Why is it so difficult to get past what our mothers do and say to us, but we have no problem ignoring the cruel words of others?"

Sophia wanted to say that she hadn't quite learnt to master her reactions to criticism, but she was certainly better at it than before.

"We love our mothers," Sophia said with a shrug. "We do not love the rest. Our mothers are meant to be the people we can turn to, but they are the last in our case. They would only see our tears as weaknesses and use them against us."

Rose nodded miserably. "Right again."

"I'm seldom wrong," said Sophia without a stitch of pride. This was not something to feel smug about. "Now, back to what I've been thinking about."

Rose turned to look at her. "I'm all ears."

A memory cut through whatever Sophia had been about to say, robbing her of her breath. Her heart raced as she recalled the man whose face had been so close to hers, his green eyes closed as he lowered his head to—

"No!" Sophia cried, startling Rose, who jerked so hard that she came close to kicking her friend in the face.

"What? What is it?" Rose asked, peering down at Sophia with concern and surprise. "Why did you yell like that?" Rose placed a hand on her heart, patting it. "I think I lost a few years of my life."

Sophia's face flamed with colour, making her turn away. "I'm sorry. I just remembered something that I have no business recalling. Pay me no mind."

Rose slid to the floor next to her, taking her hand. "There is no way that I'm going to let that go. What caused you such alarm? I've never seen you react like that before. What were you thinking about?"

Sophia had promised to keep the events of that night a secret, but she found that she needed someone to confide in. This was too big for her to squash.

“If I tell you this, you have to promise not to tell anyone else. Give me your word of honour.”

“The traditional way?”

“If that will bind you to your word.”

Rose nodded, spitting in her hand and holding it out to Sophia. Doing the same, Sophia grasped her friend's hand and kissed the back of it, letting Rose do the same, which marked a sort of covenant between them.

“Now you can tell me everything,” Rose encouraged, wiping her hand on her dress.

Sophia did the same as she gathered her thoughts together. “I wish you were there at Aunt Caroline's ball. Maybe you would have stopped what happened.”

Rose's eyes widened. “This sounds compelling, but I know you're too straitlaced to have anything scandalous touch your image, so...” The woman's words trailed off when Sophia shook her head. “What does that mean? Did you partake in scandalous behaviour at the ball?”

“I didn't precisely partake of it; it was just there.”

Rose scrunched her brow in confusion. "What was there?"

"Maybe I should say who and not what." Sophia inhaled and told the story in one breath: "Lord Brittingham mistook me for Elizabeth in Aunt Caroline's garden and kissed me."

Rose's jaw slackened as her mouth gaped open. It closed as though she was about to say something, but it fell open again. Finally, the woman regained her voice and let out a piercing shriek.

"You kissed Lord Brittingham!" the woman gasped. "Or rather, he kissed you. Oh my heavens."

"It wasn't anything," Rose quickly said. "Elizabeth was supposed to meet him, and he mistook me for her. We're similar enough that most people would confuse us in the dark. Now that I've told you, you cannot breathe a word of it to anyone. People will not understand."

Sophia could only imagine how the gossip mills would react. It didn't matter that she had not done anything wrong but be in the wrong place at the wrong time—a scandal was a scandal.

"I will not say a word," Rose promised. "But I cannot believe that you actually kissed our beautiful Earl."

Sophia didn't like how that sounded. "I did not kiss him; he kissed me. And he is not *our* Earl."

“Yes, yes,” said Rose. “I know that you didn't initiate the kiss, but you didn't draw back, did you?”

How perceptive of her friend, but Sophia was not going to look away and be embarrassed about it. After all, none of this was her fault.

“If you were in my shoes, you also would have been too shocked to do anything. The bottom line is that he mistook me for Elizabeth, which I'm happy about to some extent. I clearly thwarted his plans to seduce my sister.”

“You cannot seduce the unwilling,” Rose commented.

“You can if they're innocent enough not to realise it.”

“Ha! We'll agree to disagree on that one. So, what will you do about it?”

The answer came swift and sure. “Nothing. I will do nothing, and so will he.”

Sophia was sure of it.

Sophia had just seen her friend off when the butler came to inform her

that her parents requested an audience with her in the drawing-room.

“Right now?”

She had wanted to practise her archery skills, not sit through another lecture about pandering to Elizabeth's whims. That was all her parents seemed to talk about these days.

“Yes, Miss Emley,” the butler replied.

Sophia didn't want the servant to see her disappointed, so she put on a smile and nodded her thanks.

“I'll go see them now. Thank you, Mallory.”

The man bowed and let her walk away first before returning to his duties. Sophia wondered what her parents would demand of her now, having already grown tired of their demands. The Season was not yet through and already Sophia was exhausted.

She gave a brief knock on the door before her father's slightly gruff voice bid her entry. Sophia found her parents' grave faces behind the door, and under that, anger. What on earth could have brought about those expressions?

“You wanted to see me?” Sophia said carefully.

“Sit down, dear,” her mother ordered. “Your father and I have something important to discuss with you.”

This sounded ominous. Sophia chose a comfortable armchair, immediately curling into it like a cat. She seldom sat like a 'lady' in any chair in the house, exasperating her mother. Today, however, her mother didn't seem bothered by the position—something had to be terribly wrong. A rush of fear started at the base of her spine and travelled upwards, circling over her head. Sophia didn't dare ask what it was, knowing that her parents preferred monopoly on all conversations between them. Her job was to listen, nod her head, and agree to everything like a good daughter. Sophia would have had it down to a near science if not for the rebellious spirit in her that sometimes woke up and tried to defend her.

“We've recently come across some disturbing news,” her father began, his moustache moving as though it had a life of its own. “Or rather, the news was placed in our hands.”

That wasn't anything new. “Good news, I hope,” Sophia said with a smile.

She knew better than to ask that question. Since when had they ever called her for good news? That was easy to recall. Since Elizabeth blossomed and Sophia became her shadow.

“Good news?” her mother repeated. “Since when is hearing about your eldest daughter engaging in scandalous behaviour good news?”

Sophia's breath didn't just swoosh out of her, it disappeared altogether. No one ever wanted to hear themselves involved in

anything remotely scandalous.

“You have disgraced our family name, Sophia,” her father said, his voice never rising. That seemed worse somehow. “What do you have to say about yourself?”

Sophia caught her breath, sucking in a few gulps before she felt ready to respond. “What did I do?”

Even to her ears, she sounded plaintive. She really was clueless about what she had supposedly done. It never occurred to her that her fears had come true.

“Will you pretend not to know?” her mother asked, surprised.

“I cannot pretend when I do not know, Mama. What have I done?”

Sophia's father came to an abrupt stand, holding his hands behind him as he began to pace in front of the mantelpiece.

“She says she doesn't know,” he muttered. He stopped, giving Sophia his full attention. “While you were giggling away with that Pilkington girl, we received a caller.”

Sophia knew that because she had seen Mrs Wilson come to call on her mother. What did the woman have to do with anything?

"Mrs Wilson was kind enough to tell us shocking news that has filled your father and me with such deep shame and anger, Sophia," her mother said, purposefully prolonging the news.

Sophia wanted to scream *just tell me and put me out of this painful anticipation!* But she held her tongue. This wasn't the time to have an outburst.

"Do you have any idea what we're talking about?" her father asked.

Was this a trick question? If she said no, that might earn her a tongue lashing, but if she said yes, that would still earn her a tongue lashing. So, she remained quiet and tried to put as much innocence as she could muster into her eyes. It wasn't difficult because she really didn't know what on earth she had supposedly done.

"Is it true that you're having an affair with Lord Brittingham?" her mother blurted.

Well, that just about knocked Sophia over. "Me? An affair with Lord Brittingham? Hogwash!"

"Watch your tongue, young lady," her father warned, now leaning on the mantelpiece. "We were told that you were spotted in the Earl's arms. You were... kissing."

The man spat the last word out as though it had taken much effort to say it. Sophia groaned, sliding in her chair as she covered her eyes. Her nightmare had come true. Heaven help her.

“So you do know what we're talking about!” her mother exclaimed. It wasn't a question but an accusation.

Sophia peeked between her fingers, observing her parents. On a scale of one to ten, how angry were they? She thought about it for a second and decided she would give them a seven. This news required a ten, but they seemed to be taking the information a little better than she had thought they would.

Sitting up higher, Sophia considered the words she needed to explain herself. “Tis not what you're thinking,” she claimed. “This was merely a case of mistaken identity.”

“Mistaken identity?” her father repeated. “Since when is kissing a man you're not married to a case of mistaken identity?”

“Since knowing that I was not the woman he was supposed to kiss. Lord Brittingham mistook me for El—” Sophia stopped at that. Was she really about to uncover her sister's secret? No, she couldn't do that. “He mistook me for someone else. Do you really think a woman like me could capture the attention of the Earl? Hardly.”

Her parents looked at each other, their faces grim. Sophia could tell that they believed her, not because she was trustworthy, but that Richard would never look her way. It was sad but true. Her father was the first to turn to her, his face set in firm lines as he delivered his verdict.

“Guilty or not, we cannot allow this scandal to continue. There is only

one thing that we can do to stop the gossip from spreading.”

Sophia didn't like where this was going. “Why not simply tell the truth? No one will believe Lord Brittingham meant to kiss me.”

“Because your reputation has been compromised, Sophia,” her mother said in a tired voice. “We will do the only thing possible to us to save it.”

“What will you do?” Sophia asked, unable to hide the mild panic that had set in.

“It's not so much what we will do,” her father answered. “But what you will do. You must marry the Earl.”

Sophia felt as though the floor had given way, and she was falling into the clinging abyss of forced decisions. Marry the Earl? Her parents might as well have told her to grow a second head.

Chapter 4

A bit of socialising was exactly what Richard needed to get out of his own head. He glanced at his friend, who didn't seem all that interested in the activity ahead, but then again, what really ever engaged Nicholas?

"You can at least put on a smile," Richard remarked, patting his horse as it grazed beneath him.

They were on their way to meet with the rest of the riding party. They had agreed to join some days ago; Nicholas would probably say that he was coerced into it, but Richard knew the man just needed a little push to get him to leave the security of his home and take part in social activities again.

The man had become a mere shadow of his former self when Marianne betrayed him, leaving him for another. But Richard had begun to see more and more of his old friend as time passed.

"I'll put on a smile once we're with the others," said Nicholas. "Until then, this is what you're going to get."

Richard chuckled but didn't say anything else. Nicholas had left his house, and that was good enough.

"So, will you tell me what is bothering you, or will you continue to act like it doesn't exist?" Nicholas asked after a while.

Tell his best friend that he had kissed Elizabeth's sister? Richard could hardly say it out loud to himself! How was he going to confide in his friend?

"Nothing is wrong," he lied.

"Who are you trying to convince: me or yourself?"

Richard wasn't always fond of his friend's perceptiveness. "Mind your own business."

Nicholas chuckled, taking no offence. "Fine, fine. If you do not wish to release your mind from whatever binds it—so tightly that you almost took the wrong turn at least three times—then fine. Suit yourself."

True to his word, Nicholas did not press him as they continued on, but Richard could almost hear his friend thinking.

"It's rather embarrassing," he eventually confessed.

Nicholas glanced at him, then settled his gaze ahead once again. "You've done embarrassing things before, but you've always shared them with me. What did you do this time that you hesitate to confide in me?"

"Something that I cannot get out of my head no matter how hard I

try."

It had been days since the ball, and Richard had tried to put the kiss behind him as best as he could, but his mind kept playing it over and over again. What surprised him the most was his lack of disgust and shame. Yes, he was embarrassed to admit that he had kissed her, but he certainly wasn't remorseful of it. Quite frankly, that brief moment had taken him aback in more ways than one, leaving him with many unanswered questions, most of which Richard would never voice out loud.

"Do you promise not to laugh when I tell you what happened?"

"How can I not laugh if it's amusing?" Nicholas asked. "That would be like telling a river to flow upwards when it is naturally inclined to flow downwards."

There was already a dull light of mirth in the man's dark eyes, and Richard hadn't even told his story yet. That didn't make him feel any better.

"I do not feel like being laughed at right now. It's the last thing I need."

Nicholas shut down the glint, replacing it with a question. "Is it that bad?"

"That depends on how you look at it. Will I survive it? Yes. Has it made my life more complicated? Probably."

"That sounds serious. You don't do well bottling up everything, Richard. Just tell me what is wrong and I'll do my best to offer advice...if it's needed."

"Oh, it most certainly is. I should have probably come to you before, but I was trying to deal with it on my own." Richard laughed harshly, shaking his blond curls. "I'm on my way to see a woman that I'm no longer sure how to behave around her. This is going to be one awkward riding party."

"This has something to do with Elizabeth, doesn't it?" Nicholas asked. "You never did tell me if you went through with your plan. You simply disappeared, and I assumed that you had gone to see Elizabeth, but she was still in the ballroom when you left. What did you do?"

Richard always wondered why Elizabeth had not gone to the garden when she had agreed to it. He partly assumed she had gotten cold feet at the last minute, but the other part believed she had been interrupted along the way.

"I was supposed to meet her, but she never came."

"She was with her parents, from what I recall," said Nicholas. "I doubt she could have gotten away from them to meet you."

Richard hadn't known that because he had left soon after the incident with Sophia. He had been too shocked to stay and face Elizabeth or Sophia. There was only so much a man could take.

"Well, I wish she had come to see me. I wouldn't have made such a big mistake if she had been where we agreed to meet. Instead..."

Richard found that he couldn't say it. Would Nicholas even believe him? The kiss had certainly been stranger than fiction.

"Instead, what?" Nicholas pressed.

Richard hung his head, shaking it. He just couldn't get it out of his mouth. Remembering it was one thing, but confessing it was quite another.

"Just tell me," Nicholas urged. "The sooner you do it, the better you'll feel. You've probably convinced yourself that it's worse than it really is."

"I kissed Sophia."

Was it just him, or did the entire world suddenly go quiet? Richard couldn't hear anything but the ringing thunder in his ears. He realised was his blood pumping through his body.

"You what?" asked Nicholas.

"You heard me. I kissed Sophia."

Richard actually felt well enough to raise his head and look his friend in the eyes. He soon wished he hadn't. Nicholas' face was a mixture of horror and fascination and perhaps a little disbelief. There wasn't a bit of humour in his strong features.

"You're not pulling my leg, are you?" the man questioned.

"Why would I ever admit such a thing to anyone? No one I know would put themselves in such a stressful situation."

"What the devil were you thinking?" Nicholas suddenly roared. "Elizabeth's sister? You certainly know how to make your life difficult."

"You don't need to tell me that," Richard said miserably. "My conscience has had a field day, but it wasn't on purpose. I mistook her for Elizabeth. It was dark outside, and I didn't expect anyone else to be there. If you had looked at Sophia in the dark, even you might have been fooled. They're a similar build, colour, hair, and face shape. It wasn't a difficult mistake to make."

Richard shrugged, urging his horse onwards. The worst thing about the entire ordeal was how he had felt when he had kissed Sophia. It had not been the same as with Elizabeth, it had been more...Richard didn't know how to put it into words.

No! He didn't want to think about what the kiss had meant to him because it was nothing but a bit of a bump in his life. He would get over it soon enough. He had to.

"How did Sophia react?" Nicholas asked quietly.

"How do you think? She gasped as if I had purposefully stolen her virtue and ran off faster than I've seen most people run—men included."

Richard had been too surprised to admire how nimble she had been. She reminded him of a large cat, not a house cat, but a leopard or tiger. No woman had ever made him think that before. Richard shook the thought away and focused on the house coming into view. They were near their destination, and he was no closer to feeling less guilty about kissing Elizabeth's sister.

Perhaps he was making this a bigger deal than he needed to, but he'd have to be a lizard to not feel embarrassed about it. Richard didn't even want to imagine what Sophia thought of him. He did know for sure that the woman would never tell her younger sister about what happened between them. It wasn't big enough to cause a rift in their relationship.

I do not want to be the reason why they start fighting or worse. If Elizabeth hates me for it, then so be it. But breaking a sisterly bond is not something I wish to do.

"We'll need to tread carefully here," said Nicholas. "We don't know what's going through Sophia's head right now. I believe she'll keep this to herself to avoid unnecessary drama, or her conscience might be too strong, and she informs her sister and parents."

Richard's eyes widened. "Her parents? Surely, she wouldn't do such a thing—that would prove disastrous!"

"Precisely my point. I do not think she has, but we don't know Sophia well enough to make assumptions. We'll just have to see how Elizabeth reacts around you."

Richard would rather not, but he didn't have any other choice.

About an hour later, he found himself beside the woman in question. Richard was having trouble being himself and said the first thing that popped into his mind.

"Where is your sister?"

The question startled him more than it did Elizabeth, who looked at him with a confused expression.

"My sister?"

Why did he bring up Sophia? Why? What was he doing thinking about the plain and socially awkward woman? His question defied logic.

Did it? a smooth voice asked. Richard shut down that thought, imagining himself slamming down a huge rock and squashing the unwelcome voice.

"I know that she's usually with you," said Richard, pouring on the

charm. "You need someone to guard such beauty."

That was more like him. Richard sat up a little straighter as some of his confidence returned to him, allowing him to flash a smile that drove women to distraction. It hit its target true and through, bringing forth a blush on Elizabeth's creamy skin. She truly was a stunning sight to behold.

"I have come with my mother," she explained. "Sophia wasn't feeling well and has remained at home. I'm glad, or I would not have been able to speak with you as I wish to. I'm sorry that I couldn't meet you the other night. Mama chose the wrong moment to introduce me to some of her friends."

Considering that he had kissed her sister, this was a small thing to forgive. "Do not pay it any mind, Elizabeth. There are always other opportunities."

As soon as he had said it, Richard realised that he didn't mean it. He wasn't sure if he wanted to chance another secret meeting with Elizabeth. Sophia was on her guard and would keep an even closer eye on her sister. It was amazing that she wasn't on this trip, but it wasn't surprising either. The woman was probably avoiding him for the time being. Smart of her.

The day passed with Richard giving Elizabeth his undivided attention. She appeared more talkative and cheerful than usual, making up for the moments when Richard fell into silence. Elizabeth didn't notice, which served him well. She wouldn't want to know what he was thinking anyway.

Richard's parents were not at home when he returned. He considered taking dinner in his room, not wanting the formality of sitting at a table and having the servants stand to attention—not when he was so bothered that he could hardly hide his emotions.

It had been a tiring experience pretending that everything was fine between him and Elizabeth. The truth was the kiss had hung between them like a dividing line which the woman had been blissfully unaware of.

If she had noticed that anything was wrong, she certainly didn't give any indication of it. Had the roles been reversed, with Sophia and Elizabeth swapping places, Sophia would have undoubtedly picked up on something wrong. The woman was too observant not to.

"Why am I thinking about her again?" he asked himself, rubbing his tired eyes.

Perhaps he could skip dinner and just ask for a light meal before getting into bed. He was exhausted, after all. Not from the riding, but from trying hard to appear his usual self when he was anything but that. Guilt tended to do that to a person.

Trudging upstairs, Richard barely greeted the servants he met along the way, hoping they didn't think he was rude. Most masters took no care to their servant's well-being, but Richard had respect even for the lowliest of people. It didn't take a limb or organ to respect another human, but people of his class would probably differ on this. Richard had just about removed his coat and shoes when a knock drew his attention.

"Yes?"

"May I come in, my lord?" his butler asked.

"Of course, Cavendish."

The tall man entered the room, looking away from the bed as he relayed a message from Richard's parents.

"The Duke and Duchess require your presence in the drawing-room this evening, my lord. May I tell them that you will be with them shortly?"

Richard thought about that for a moment. He didn't want to see anyone right now; his bed was beckoning to him. However, his parents usually didn't call him unless it was something important.

"Very well, Cavendish. Tell them I'll be down shortly. I need to get out of these dusty clothes."

"Of course, my lord. Forgive me for interrupting you."

"Pay no mind to it."

The butler dipped his head once before leaving Richard in peace to do a little washing up. He would have preferred some hot water sent up to his room, but the pitcher of cold water would have to do for now. Richard stripped down as far as he thought necessary, washing his face and arms before drying them with a bath sheet hanging nearby. He didn't go for his usual evening attire, hoping his parents would forgive his lack of proper clothing. He was simply too tired to bother this evening. It was enough that he didn't look like the wind has just blown him in.

The water had done some good with waking him up and Richard no longer felt like the sleeping dead. He didn't bother to announce his arrival in the drawing-room with a knock since it was wide open. His parents looked up from their serious conversation, their eyes worried but resigned. What was going on?

"Shut the door behind you, Richard," his father ordered. "I do not wish the servants to hear us."

Considering that the servants heard and knew everything anyway, Richard found the request strange, but he did it.

"Good evening, Father, Mother," he greeted, striding in and settling in an armchair. "Cavendish said you wished to see me."

"Yes, son. Your father, and I have important news to share with you," his mother affirmed. "I wish there was another way around this matter, but your father and I have found none."

The Duchess sounded like she was in the middle of the story instead of starting at the beginning.

"I do not follow," he confessed.

"Mr and Mrs Emley came to see us this afternoon," his father told him. "I must admit that I was surprised to be called upon so suddenly and without warning, but once I learned their reason, I understood the expedient nature of their coming here."

Hearing that Elizabeth's parents had come to see his parents had surprised Richard, but knowing that the matter they discussed with the Duke and Duchess was so important that they came without prior notice worried him. There could only be two reasons for their visit: one, they had discovered his relationship with Elizabeth and wished to discuss it; or two, they had found out about the kiss he had shared with Sophia. The latter frightened him the most.

Richard had to swallow several times before he could speak. "Why did they come here?"

"You cannot guess?" his father asked mockingly. "Do you not know what you have been up to?"

He had been up to many things. His father would have to be more specific than that.

"Tell me, Father," Richard pressed. "What has you and Mother so worried?"

"Other than the fact that you compromised a young woman and now

have to pay for the damages? Not much."

Richard didn't let the panic show on his face, but he felt it tying a noose about his neck and pulling on it.

"What do you mean?"

His father sighed, suddenly looking his sixty-seven years. The man was twenty years older than his wife, but his friendly and charming manner had made him seem at least ten years younger.

"Is it or is it not true that you kissed Miss Emley? I already know the truth, but I want to hear it from your lips."

Richard ran both hands through his hair, letting out a ragged breath. "It was a mistake," he confessed. "She was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"That may be, but her reputation hangs in the balance," his father said. "I will not have a woman be destroyed by my own son's careless behaviour. There is only one way out of this."

Richard didn't want to ask the question, but he did anyway. "What would that be?"

The Duke looked him straight in the eyes until Richard flinched and looked away. He may be a grown man, but his father was still the head of the family.

"You have to marry her, Richard," his mother said, "You have to marry her and restore honour to both families. It's the only way."

What? Marry Sophia? Had his parents lost their minds?! "The hell I will!"

"Watch your words, Richard," his father warned. "I will not say it twice."

"But how can you marry me off to that woman?" Richard asked, hating the whine in his voice. "No one else wants her!"

"This is not up for discussion," his father stated. "You will marry Miss Emley as soon as we can secure a wedding day."

"But I prefer the other sister!" Richard said in dismay. "I do not like Sophia, Father. I like Elizabeth. I refuse to marry a woman whom people always reject."

Something like shame crossed his mother's face. "That is no way to talk about your future wife."

"My wife?" Richard bellowed. "I can hardly take care of myself! What will I do with a wife like her? I will not marry her, I tell you."

"Then I shall be forced to leave you penniless and order you to leave this house. No son of mine lacking in honour will inherit a single coin from this estate. Do you hear me?"

They would cut him off from the family coffers? That seemed unfair. Anger poured into Richard, causing him to ball his hands into tight fists.

"If you think that you can dangle a carrot above my head and assume that I'll do anything you tell me to, then you do not know me. Good evening."

Richard left the room and his parents' shouts to return immediately. He didn't listen. He simply went upstairs and packed a few things before heading to a carriage and telling the driver to take him to Nicholas' house. At least his friend would be more sympathetic. However, when he arrived at Nicholas' townhouse and explained his situation, the man was anything but sympathetic.

"Stay with me for a few days if you must, but you'll have to face the consequences of that night," he told Richard.

"What if I don't want to?"

Richard sounded like a petulant child. He hated it. All that he needed to do now was cross his arms and pout.

"That's not a choice. The worst has happened, and now you must deal with it. Do you really hate Sophia so much that you would resign her to the fate of being a loose woman? Your reputation will eventually

recover, but hers won't."

Nicholas spoke the truth, but Richard didn't want to hear it. "Can I take my usual room? I need some sleep."

His friend sighed. "Yes, of course. Go ahead. I'll be down here when you're ready to talk."

It took nearly a week before Richard had calmed down enough to discuss his disaster. He had warred within himself while pretending to be fine on the outside, but nothing was fine. It was either he married Sophia, or he didn't.

He found Nicholas in his study looking over a map of England. The man had a fascination with geography and science, but not so much maths. It baffled Richard that the man put so much time into learning things that did not enrich his life in any way. Nicholas was already wealthy and educated.

"Can we talk?"

His friend looked up, setting his magnet upon the table and nodding. "Come in."

Richard got comfortable in an armchair, knowing Nicholas was looking at him expectantly. The man presumed Richard would do the right thing.

"Stop fussing in the chair so much," said Nicholas at last. "You've sat on it hundreds of times."

"I know. It's my mind that refuses to settle."

"So you haven't reached a decision?" Nicholas sounded disappointed.

"I have. I'm not happy about this situation and would get out of it in a heartbeat if I could, but I'm stuck with it. You're right that I could never allow a woman to have her reputation ruined because of me, so I plan to do right by her."

"You've decided to marry her?"

Richard nodded. "I don't want to, but my sense of honour is stronger than my wants right now. I'm leaving once we're done here and going home. My parents will be pleased."

His voice lacked emotion, but inside, Richard felt trapped and unhappy. Sophia was the last woman he would have wished to marry, but the decision had been taken out of his hands by his own foolish mistake. Now, he had to be a man and handle it accordingly. Richard didn't even want to think about what Elizabeth would say or do. Today had enough of its own woes.

Chapter 5

Sophia knew that if she looked in the mirror right now, she would see a mess. She certainly felt like one. Some of her hair was stuck to her face, and her entire face felt swollen. Despite knowing this, she couldn't stop crying. Rose consoled her as best she could, but Sophia was beyond comfort; she was beyond anyone's help.

"Shhh," Rose murmured, rocking her side to side.

Sophia had come to Rose to run away from her parents' judging stares and Elizabeth's burning hatred, needing a friendly face to tell her that everything would be all right. The funny thing was Sophia already knew that nothing could be right again. Her life was ruined.

"It's not that bad, is it?" Rose asked, still stroking Sophia's head.

Not that bad? Sophia pulled away from her friend, giving her a hard stare. "What do you mean by that? My parents think that I purposefully brought shame to the family for want of attention. My own sister doesn't believe this was an accident and believes I planned the entire thing to trap Richard into marriage. Now, tell me again that it's not bad."

Rose nodded and pulled Sophia back against her. Sophia didn't go willingly, but once her friend's arms were around her again, she felt a little better.

"I understand that this is difficult for you, Soph, but what else can you

say or do to convince your parents and Elizabeth that you're innocent of the crimes they're accusing you of? You didn't do anything wrong."

No, she hadn't, but sometimes Sophia wondered why she hadn't just run away before Richard approached her or said something to make him realise that she wasn't Elizabeth. Of course, the answer was that she had simply been too stunned and frightened to do much. Sophia was usually better at dealing with situations, but watching a dark figure looming towards her in the night had been her breaking point.

I managed to get my legs moving eventually, but it was too late, wasn't it? The deed had already been done, and now I'm paying for it. What must Richard think? Does he believe I purposefully tricked him into thinking I was Elizabeth? I hope not.

That would just be too embarrassing. No, this was his fault, not hers. It had been wrong of him to lure Elizabeth away to steal a kiss in the first place, and if Sophia didn't love her sister so much, she would have told her parents as much. How would they like knowing that their precious daughter was supposed to have been the woman the Earl wanted to kiss?

"You're thinking so hard that steam is coming out of your ears," Rose commented. "You're thinking about the Earl, aren't you? You don't plan to hurt him, do you?"

"Hurt him in what way?"

Sophia felt her shrug. "I don't know. Your mind works in mysterious ways and sometimes scares me. You don't think as most people do, Sophia. You're altogether a different breed of person."

“Thank you so much. That really makes me feel better.”

Rose sighed. "I didn't mean to make you seem like a freak, and you know that. I just worry about you sometimes. You're stuck between wanting to do the right thing and throwing caution to the wind to do whatever you please. I'm worried you'll go with the latter."

Sophia would be lying if she said she hadn't been thinking about something that might make the entire situation worse, but would give her the freedom she desired. Elizabeth sometimes joked and said she thought like a man, and to some extent, her sister wasn't wrong. If being independent and doing whatever she pleased was thinking like a man, then so be it.

“I'm still not certain about what I wish to do, but my fate seems certain. My parents want me to marry Richard.”

“But will you?” Rose asked.

Her friend knew her too well. “I don't know. I do not want to marry him if I can help it, but no one has given me that option. The only thing available to me is accepting a new title and living with it.”

“I'm too scared to even ask what that title is, but I'm too curious not to ask.”

Sophia smiled at that. “Your curiosity is worse than mine, you know. That's how you usually end up with your derrière on the floor.”

Rose laughed, slightly shaking Sophia. "Don't I know it! I would think it my biggest flaw, but Mama might argue that. She would say it's my lack of physical beauty. *C'est la vie, non?*"

Sophia shifted away from her friend and tucked her knees under her. "You're not ugly, Rose."

Her friend looked away, but not before Sophia saw a look of despair enter the woman's eyes. Sophia held her friend's chin and brought her face back to look at her. Rose stubbornly kept her eyes down, but Sophia knew her enough to guess what was happening behind them.

"So what if you do not fit the current beauty ideal? It doesn't make you any less beautiful in my eyes."

Rose looked up, her gaze sad. "The cloth cuts both ways. I think you're beautiful, but you do not believe me. We see things in ourselves that we love in the other but do not love in ourselves. If I was a suspicious person, I would think it was some sort of a curse."

Rose was right, but Sophia wanted to chase away the sadness in her friend's eyes. "Should we find a four-leaf clover to bring us luck? Or perhaps try to look for a witch to break the spell? Maybe she could make us more acceptable to society."

"That's not funny at all," Rose complained, but at least she was smiling. "Mama would keel over and give up her ghost if I ever consulted a witch. Sometimes I want to do it just because I can."

“Feeling defiant?” Sophia asked with a smile.

“You rub off on me. I was a docile creature before you came along and turned that on its head. I think my parents grow increasingly exasperated with me every time I defy them in something.”

“Wanting apricot jam over strawberry is not defiance; it’s a preference.”

Rose barked out laughter. “I forgot that I told you about that. Mama kept insisting that strawberry jam is a better fit for the bread Cook had baked, and I persistently slathered apricot jam all over a piece of toast.”

It had been one of the most ridiculous arguments Sophia had ever heard, but she had to admit that she had a few of her own. Most of hers were about her fashion choices. Sophia had a good head for fashion, but her mother and sister were adamant that she should never outshine Elizabeth's wardrobe.

Apparently, Sophia had had her chance at her first London Season, and now Elizabeth needed her opportunity to shine. Sophia didn't bother reminding her mother that the budget she had given to make a few gowns and dresses for her Season had been so low that a shoddy seamstress had been hired. The result had been ill-fitting clothes and colours that clashed with her complexion. Sophia had never stood a chance.

“Where is your mother today? I haven't seen her yet.”

Rose rolled her eyes. "A merchant came boasting about a new cosmetic cream that promises youthful skin and increased beauty, and Mama just had to buy it. She has gone to Oxford Street to purchase another tub of it. I expect she'll be back in time for tea—Mama does not like to miss her tea time."

Last year, the Frenchwoman had hired a pâtissier to create all the pastries she loved so much. Her waistline had grown with their consumption, but she appeared happy. Sophia wondered when her weight gain would eventually become a problem.

"Then I suppose I should get myself cleaned up before she sees me like this. She might try to slather me with her special cream."

Rose laughed. "I wouldn't put it past her. Come, we'll go to my room."

They went hand in hand to Rose's room, where the woman sat on the bed and talked while Sophia did her best to bring down the swelling in her face. Why did she have to look so hideous whenever she cried? Elizabeth had the perfect crying face and never seemed to swell or get sticky nose fluid all over her face and dress. She wasn't messy like Sophia.

Her mood dipped as she thought about her sister. ; poor Elizabeth didn't know how to handle that her sister marrying the man she probably loved. It was too much for her. No wonder Elizabeth hated the sight of her and had even wished her dead. Sophia knew her sister hadn't meant it, but it had hurt all the same. Whatever imbecile came up with the idiom 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me' did not know what on earth he had been talking about. Words cut to the heart and left unseen scars that sometimes never healed.

“No, Sophia,” Rose protested. “I just had you laughing. What black hole did you go into this time? I know that you have several.”

"No more than you," Sophia bit back, hating that she was such an open book. Regret filled her when Rose's face closed off. "I'm sorry, Rose. I really am. Do not mind me, please. I'm stressed about everything, and I'm taking it out on you."

“I do not mind,” Rose insisted, but Sophia could hear the hurt in the woman's voice.

Why did she sometimes forget that Rose was sensitive? Feeling terrible, Sophia settled next to her friend and put her head on the woman's shoulder.

“I'm a horrible friend. You can say it, I don't mind.”

Rose laid her head on Sophia, taking her hand. “You're the best friend I've ever had. I would have to be a weakling to not take your bad days along with your good.”

“If you were a man, I would have married you,” Sophia claimed. “We're perfect for each other.”

“I can't argue with that. Why can't we find men who appreciate us as we are?”

Sophia shrugged. "I have no answer for that. They all seem to like pretty and dainty women who either enthrall them or submit to them. We do not fit into those categories."

"That was an answer," Rose said with a smile in her voice.

"I suppose it was. Do you think you could fix my hair, so I do not look like a hag when your mother comes home?"

Rose stood up. "That I can do. Mama allows no one else to do her hair but me. I suppose I am useful for something."

Sophia grabbed her hand, pulling the woman to her for a quick embrace. "If it's any consolation to you, you're the only person I trust with all my heart."

"The feeling is mutual." Rose voice sounded a little less like a wounded child's. "Now come, you have too much hair to get through on such little time. Mama's tea is fast approaching."

Sophia sat on a padded stool in front of the mirror and gave her hair over to her friend. Rose knew what she was doing because Sophia's hair looked better than when she had arrived at the Pilkington residence.

"Simply magic," said Sophia, admiring her hair. "Thank you."

"There's no need to thank me. Being my best friend is payment enough. Let's meet Mama in her parlour—I know she'll want to see you and ask about your engagement."

Sophia shut her eyes, scrunching up her face. "I suppose I'll have to endure personal questions?"

"Mama is nothing but frank. She's French."

Rose said that as though it explained everything. Oddly, it did.

* * *

A promenade through the park was Rose's idea, but Sophia was quickly regretting it. Everywhere she looked people seemed to be staring at her. At first, she had assumed they were looking at the gorgeous Frenchwoman, but their gazes were not admiring at all. They seemed judgemental and curious.

"*Où est ta mère, Sophie?*" Mrs Pilkington asked. "I have not seen her in so long."

The Frenchwoman never called her Sophia, but Sophie. "She is mostly at home, Madame Pilkington. This is Elizabeth's first Season, and there is always something to do. Sometimes, she accompanies my sister to parties."

“*Bon*. I like that she has taken such an interest in this Season. She was not so careful with yours, *non*?”

Everyone but Sophia's mother was aware that the woman had not put as much effort into making her a success. Perhaps her mother had thought her independent enough to deal with it on her own, or maybe the woman had not thought it worth her while to focus on a daughter who would never be the belle of the ball. Sophia wasn't mad at either option.

“*Oui, Madame*. But I believe she did the best she could.”

The woman's expression was dubious. “*C'est ne pas vrai, Sophie*. My daughter is plain, but I did everything I could to, how do you say it in English, eh—*élever*?”

“Elevate,” Rose answered, her tones clipped.

“*Merci, ma chérie*,” her mother replied with a smile. “*Oui*, I did everything I could to elevate my daughter. It did not help, but at least I know I am a good mother.”

Sophia took her friend's hand, squeezing it gently. She knew the young woman had to be hurting inside, but she was careful not to show it, or her mother might play the victim. Mrs Pilkington acted like the perfect mother, but Sophia knew her well enough to know that she had flaws and leaned towards the narcissistic. Perhaps it was time to change the conversation.

“Your chef makes the best pastries, Madame. I think my mother would

be jealous if she knew.”

A smug smile spread across the woman's face. “This is true. Phillipe is the best I could find, and he is from France. There is no other nation better than my own.”

“Which was why you married Papa,” Rose said under her breath.

“What is that, *ma petite*?” the Frenchwoman asked, her brow wrinkling.

“Nothing, Mama,” said Rose. “I do not think you should frown so much. What if you get deep furrows on your brow?”

The woman gasped, touching her forehead before getting out a little mirror and opening it to admire herself. Sophia had never met a woman who was vainer. Yes, she was beautiful, but that could only get one so far. When she was satisfied, she closed the mirror with a click and joined arms with them on either side of her.

“It's a beautiful day, *non*? I love summer, but not as much as spring.”

Sophia wanted to say that she loved winter because it was cold like her soul, but she didn't think it would go down well with the woman.

“Mama, Sophia and I would like to take a walk by ourselves,” said Rose. “We have much to talk about.”

“But you talked a lot at the house, *ma fille*. What could you possibly have to talk about now?”

"Many things," Rose insisted, her voice firm. "Do you not have something to do at home? Both Sophia and I have had our first Season, so it will not be improper to walk by ourselves."

“*Mais, ma petite*, what will your Papa say? He does not like his *petite fille* to be alone.”

“She is not alone, Madame,” Sophia piped in. “I am here with her.”

The Frenchwoman didn't look happy, but she nodded. “*D'accord*. Go and have your *tête-à-tête*, but I will follow behind. My daughter must maintain her reputation.”

Sophia wondered if that was a stab at her but knew the woman wasn't vindictive. She merely said what was on her mind without much care to the listener.

“I am sorry about my mother,” Rose apologised as soon as they had put some distance between them. “Her mouth runs away from her at times.”

“I know, and I'm not offended. How can I be when you have to deal with her day in and day out? At least she pays you attention.”

"I wish she wouldn't," Rose confessed. "It gets to be too much, especially when I know that I fail her every day. Sometimes, I think she wakes up believing her prayers have been answered and she will find a beautiful daughter downstairs waiting for her, but it's always just plain old me."

"Now, who is the sad one?" Sophia said, bumping the woman's shoulder with her own. "This walk is meant to cheer us up."

"I hate walking."

"Me, too."

They looked at each other, then burst out laughing, startling a few birds perched near them. They took flight, flapping their little wings until they disappeared.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Rose asked.

"That we wish we were like those birds?"

"Yes."

"Then yes, I was thinking about that. All you have to do is get up and fly away if you don't like an environment or situation."

Rose shook her head, smiling. "We must be the most sullen pair to ever walk this land."

"But we do it so well. We should get paid for it."

That set them off laughing again. It honestly did feel good to be out in the fresh air with a friend who shared one's sense of humour. Everything would have been perfect if Sophia had not noticed the people that were still staring at her.

"Ignore them," Rose said into her ear. "They are not worth your time."

"That's a bit hard when they're everywhere," Sophia whispered. "Why did I let you talk me into it?"

"Because you needed the fresh air," her friend insisted.

"I need a lot of things, but that doesn't mean I have to get them. Certainly not if it comes with this lot. Look at them staring!"

"Let's not think about them, Soph. I've given this marriage some careful consideration, and I think you should marry the Earl."

That stopped Sophia in her tracks. "Oh, Rose. Not you, too. I thought I explained it all to you."

“You did, but I cannot help wondering what life would be like if you took the marriage route and not the spinster one.”

“A disaster,” Sophia replied with feeling. “Marrying a man who does not want you is far worse than being a spinster.”

Rose looked at her for a moment, then shook her head. “We'll have to agree to disagree, Soph. At least give this marriage a fighting chance to survive.”

That wasn't even an option. Richard would never see her as someone worthy of loving, and Sophia would probably always resent him for trapping her. It may not have been done deliberately, but the fact remained that Richard had compromised her. It had cost her the respect of her parents and the love of a sister.

Sophia noticed a group of women approaching them. Their eyes darted to her and then to each other as they spoke in hushed tones. She couldn't hear what they were saying at first, but then she heard something that took the fight out of her.

“Isn't that the woman who was so desperate that she trapped Lord Brittingham?” a woman asked.

“I think so,” another answered. “I actually feel sorry for the Earl. Who would want to be married to that?”

A small sob escaped Sophia's lips at the same time that Rose's grip tightened on hers. How much more was she expected to take?

Everyone blamed her as though she was the one who had kissed Richard when it had been the other way around. It wasn't fair.

“I can't be here anymore, Rose. I want to go home.”

Her friend nodded. “I understand. Let's go back to Mama and tell her we've had enough.”

Sophia nodded wordlessly, allowing her friend to turn them back and return to Madame Pilkington. Since their townhouse was nearby, Sophia took the Pilkington carriage home, where she was met with more disappointed looks and a sister who could hardly look at her without spitting venom. Was this what her life had been reduced to?

“Come, Sophia,” her mother called. “We must discuss your trousseau. We cannot have you going to the Earl's family in rags.”

Would it matter? No one would take notice of her anyway. “Yes, Mama.”

Getting married was supposed to be a joyous occasion in a woman's life, but Sophia felt nothing but shame and despair. This was Richard's fault.

Chapter 6

Where had they learned to play cricket? Richard watched as a man swung his bat to hit the ball but missed completely. The man spun in place and fell hard to his knees, earning a shout of laughter from his team mates. Amused, Richard watched the man stand up, dust himself off, and walk away.

“That was an easy shot,” he remarked, shaking his head. “How did he miss it?”

Crossing his legs at the ankle, Richard reclined on one of the throws set out for the guests, using his elbows to keep his upper body off the ground. An hour or so had passed since some fool decided that the afternoon would be better off with a game of cricket. Richard usually enjoyed the sport, but watching players who were terrible at the game was pure torture.

“I can throw and bat better than that in my sleep,” Nicholas added.

Richard rolled his head towards his friend, smiling at the disgusted look on the man's face.

“Why don't you play and show them how it's done?”

“I'm keeping you company, remember?” said Nicholas. “You're the one who feels like his life is over. I'm just making sure you don't try anything stupid between now and the wedding day.”

Richard groaned. "Don't remind me. That's all my mother has talked about since I returned home and said that I'd marry the woman."

"Her name is Sophia. You might as well get used to calling her by her name."

Richard didn't want to get used to anything that had to do with the woman. "I've got months before I have to worry about that. Mother is planning an autumn wedding at our country estate."

Nicholas raised his eyebrows. "I'm surprised that they're going to wait so long to see you married."

Richard had been surprised as well, but he hadn't complained. Any delay in marrying Sophia Emley was a good thing to him.

"She thinks having a rushed wedding will intensify the scandal allegations," he told his friend.

Two deep lines appeared between Nicholas's dark eyebrows. "People usually do the opposite if they want to quell any rumours or scandals."

"Don't question my mother's thinking," Richard advised. "It's not worth the headache. I'm just glad I don't have to marry Sophia any time soon. Perhaps Providence will smile down on me and offer me a way out of this snake pit."

"That's rather harsh, considering it's your fault."

Richard shrugged his shoulders. "That's a matter of perspective."

Nicholas didn't say anything more as two of their friends plonked themselves down beside them, their faces red and sweaty from the game.

"Do you both intend to stay here for the entire afternoon?" Philip asked. "I thought you would have volunteered to bat by now, Richie."

Richard hated it when people called him that. "I don't know who Richie is. Is he a friend?"

Philip rolled his eyes, laughing. "Someone is in a bad mood. Are you still angry about that Emley girl? I don't blame you. I think I'd let a horse drag me across this lawn before I'd marry Sophia."

Richard said nothing because he agreed with Philip. If he had a way out of this marriage, he would gladly take it.

"I think that's below the belt," said Nicholas. "That woman has done nothing wrong to deserve such hateful comments, you know. Her only crime is not fitting our society's beauty standards."

Marcus, another friend, guffawed. "So says the man who once said that he would never marry an ugly woman!"

"That was when I didn't know beautiful women could rip out your heart just as easily as they blush," Nicholas replied, his voice without inflection. "Consider it a lesson learned."

Richard studied his friend's expression, waiting to see the usual look of hurt in the man's eyes. He saw nothing. Did this mean Nicholas had finally healed from his heartbreak?

"I'd take that over an ugly woman any day!" said Marcus, chortling.

Richard struggled to hide his look of distaste. Why did the man's laugh always annoy him so much? Richard felt like scooping up a pile of dirt and stuffing Marcus' mouth with it.

"Let's not make Richard feel any worse," Philip admonished, his face a mixture of playfulness and seriousness. "He fell prey to a woman's tricks, and now he has to live with her for the rest of his life. That's a fate worse than death."

Richard tilted his head slightly, giving Philip his full attention. "Whose tricks did I fall prey to?"

"Sophia's, of course," said Philip. "You don't expect us to believe that you willingly kissed her, do you? That just seems... wrong."

"Not to mention impossible," Marcus added.

This wasn't the first time that Richard had heard the story about Sophia tricking him into marriage. Several people had given their opinion on the scandal and were fully convinced that Sophia was the culprit behind everything. Some had even suggested that she had consulted a gypsy woman who had given her a potion and an incantation to trap any man Sophia wanted. That rumour had been far-fetched and frankly ridiculous, but Richard hadn't protested to the stories.

"He didn't think he was kissing Sophia, you fools" said Nicholas. "She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"More so in the right place at the right time!" cried Marcus. "Women like her are crafty and know just how to get what they want. It's most unfortunate that she could do nothing about her physical appearance. She needs to bathe in an extra strength potion for that, and even then it might not work."

What was Marcus and Philip's obsession with the supernatural? Shaking his head, Richard laced his hands behind his head and lay down.

"What has Elizabeth said about the engagement?" Philip inquired. "I imagine she isn't happy about it."

Richard had no idea what Elizabeth truly felt about his engagement to her sister; he hadn't seen Elizabeth since the riding party and wasn't sure he wanted to.

"I have not yet had the opportunity to speak to her."

"Perhaps she has disowned her sister," Marcus suggested. "If they were men, they might have had a duel for the honour of marrying Richard."

"Have you spoken to her yet?" Philip pressed. "I think you should."

"What do you propose I say to her?" Richard snapped, growing annoyed with the questions. "Should I apologise for kissing her sister? For getting engaged? That's hardly something anyone would want to say to a woman. Elizabeth already knows the details. Talking to her will only worsen the situation."

"Richard is right," said Nicholas. "Now is not the best time to discuss Elizabeth. She is his past, and Sophia is his future."

The future Countess of Brittingham. What would his ancestors say about him marrying an unworthy woman to take the Countess position and later become Duchess? Sophia Emley was going to be an influential woman very soon and the mother of the next Hatherton heir. She was going to be all these things and more, but she would never be the woman of his heart, not in this lifetime. Richard had decided that he would tolerate and respect Sophia as his wife, and hoped she didn't expect much more from him.

"That sounds like a death sentence," Marcus remarked. "You must hate her for what she has done."

Now would be the time to tell his friends that he was the culprit behind the scandal, not Sophia. However, Richard's courage failed him, and he remained quiet. He could feel Nicholas' eyes like a searing

rod on him, but he didn't dare look at the man. Nicholas also knew the full truth and was likely waiting for Richard to admit it, but the man would be waiting until kingdom come.

Despite his reluctance to speak the truth, Richard felt a niggling guilt at the back of his mind. Sophia didn't deserve these comments and accusations, but who would benefit more from this marriage? Sophia, of course—she had been the one doomed to remain a spinster for the rest of her life, and now she was set to marry a handsome and wealthy earl. She couldn't have done any better for herself. What did it matter if Richard kept his pride in the process? Let people think that she orchestrated the entire scandal so he could save face.

“Are you listening?” Philip asked, waving a hand in front of Richard's face.

Richard blinked slowly, frowning at the man. “Did you say something?”

“I said quite a bit, but you appear to be far away!” Philip complained. “Do not allow this situation to suck away your joy before you've even spoken your vows. There might still be hope.”

Hope? Richard nearly laughed at that. “I've never taken you for an optimistic person, Philip. Anyone with eyes can see that this situation is hopeless.”

Philip shrugged and lay back. “I was being hopeful for your sake. You may have no way out, but you do not necessarily have to think that way. I fancy a game of cards right now,” the man suddenly announced, changing the subject. “What say the rest of you gentlemen?”

Marcus jumped at the opportunity, but Richard and Nicholas hesitated. Philip was a sore loser, and Marcus would bet the shirt off his back if he could. Playing cards with them wouldn't be a relaxing activity.

"Another day, perhaps?" Nicholas offered. "Unfortunately, Richard and I have to leave soon. In fact," the man added, taking out his pocket watch and giving it a brief glance. "We should go now."

"Go where?" asked Marcus.

Richard could see where his friend was going with this. "A prior engagement," he said, getting to his feet. "Thank you for reminding me, Nick. I almost forgot all about it."

"My pleasure," said Nicholas, also rising in one fluid motion. "Perhaps we'll make a day of cards this coming week."

Philip and Marcus looked disappointed, but Richard didn't feel the least sorry about leaving. He had had enough of the talk surrounding his scandal with Sophia and needed some time away from it all. His guilt was also pushing at his conscience more than he had expected, and Richard was worried he would say something that would embarrass him.

Once they were settled in the carriage, Richard waited for Nicholas to say something about the conversation they had had with their friends, but his friend remained silent on the matter. Richard could tell that he had something to say and was surprised that Nicholas was keeping it

to himself.

“Aren't you going to say anything?” Richard finally asked.

Nicholas turned away from the window and gave him an inquiring gaze. “About what?”

"About what happened back there. I know you disapprove."

“If you know how I feel, what is the point of waiting for me to say something?”

Richard sighed, looking away. “You're disappointed, aren't you?”

“In what?”

“You're going to keep asking me questions until I admit it.”

“Admit what?”

Richard gave a growl of frustration. “Simply say what you mean to say! There is no need to beat around the bush.”

“You wish me to tell you that I think you're a spineless coward who

would rather let an innocent woman who already has most of the world against her take the blame for everything that has happened instead of confessing to what you did?”

Richard felt his friend's words like a hammer strike to the chest. “You certainly don't mince your words, do you?”

Nicholas spread his hands. “You asked me to stop beating around the bush; I did what you asked me to do.”

Richard cupped the back of his neck, massaging it. “This is more trouble than it's worth. How did I get into this mess?”

“I could tell you, but I assume you already know,” said Nicholas with a small smile.

“Yes. Please spare me your explanation. You're only making me feel worse.”

“Just imagine how Sophia feels,” Nicholas said, driving his point home.

Richard glared at his friend for a moment before his guilt kicked in, and he quickly dropped his shoulders. Nicholas was right. There was no telling how Sophia was coping, but how terrible could it be when her future would look like a faerie tale compared to what awaited him? What did he get out of this marriage?

“She only has to suffer for a little while, Nick,” Richard explained. “I’ll be suffering for the rest of my life.”

Nicholas lifted his eyebrows and stared him down. "Do you truly believe that? Do you think people will forget so quickly? Perhaps if Sophia was a great beauty, people might forgive her in time. But she's not, is she? She'll forever be known as the woman who tricked England's Most Eligible Bachelor into marriage. Being a countess—and eventually a duchess—will not change that. People have long memories, especially when they feel cheated."

Richard could see some truth to his friend's words, but he wasn't going to accept all of it.

“What is it that you expect me to do? No, do not answer that,” he quickly added.

Nicholas would probably tell him to confess everything, which Richard wasn't prepared to do just yet. Besides, that would mean getting Elizabeth into trouble as well and besmirching her name. Richard was loathe to hurt her any further.

"I cannot force you to do anything but at least make the best of the situation, for Sophia's sake," said Nicholas. "She is the victim here, not you. I daresay she has had more to deal with than you have."

Richard snorted. “Make the best of the situation? That's asking for a miracle.”

Nicholas rolled his eyes. “Must you be so dramatic? You'll likely meet

her soon enough. I expect you to respect her and try to be nice.”

“That's all I have ever been to her,” Richard protested. “She is the one who chooses to treat me as though I'm the scum between her toes.”

Nicholas laughed. “Well, good! She'll teach you some humility, and perhaps you'll finally see her as someone other than what society has portrayed her as.”

“If you like her so much, why don't you marry her?”

“I have sworn off women, remember?” Nicholas reminded him. “Sophia Emley seems like a good woman, Richard. I admit that she has a sharp tongue and isn't as comely as we usually prefer our women to be, but give yourself a chance to get to know her. I imagine that she is rather scared at the moment and needs a friendly face. As her future husband, I suggest you treat her kindly.”

Richard said nothing but pursed his lips and turned his body away from his friend. Nicholas spoke as though everything was a straightforward matter. Did he fail to understand that nothing about Sophia was easy? The woman was as prickly as a thorn bush and he would likely bleed if he got too close. But Nicholas was right about one thing: it was only a matter of time before Richard came face to face with his future wife.

* * *

Several Days Later

It was one thing to know that one had to eventually go through a distasteful task, but actually experiencing it was another thing altogether.

Richard reluctantly moved forward to greet his fiancée, lightly holding her hand and bringing it to his mouth. He gave a little jerk when Sophia pulled her hand out of his and gave him a tight smile before looking away at something over his shoulder. Richard looked behind him, seeing nothing but a few paintings. Was Sophia that interested in the paintings, or was she just ignoring him? He wasn't quite sure, not yet.

"We're so glad that you could come at such short notice," said Richard's mother. "I felt that we needed a lovely small dinner to get to know each other better, and to give Richard and Sophia time to get to know each other as well. Everything has happened so quickly and, well..."

The Duchess trailed off, looking a little awkward as she probably tried to delicately refer to the scandal.

"I was thinking the same thing," Mrs Emley said with a smile much warmer than her daughter's. "I would have invited you had you not invited us first."

Looking relieved, the Duchess gestured at the chairs. "Please, take a seat. We have some time to talk before the food is to be served."

Sophia seemed to completely ignore Richard as she sat beside her parents on what he thought was the least comfortable chair in the

drawing-room. Had she chosen it on purpose? Richard gave a minute shrug of his shoulders and sat down as well, noting that his parents had subtly pushed him towards the seat closest to Sophia.

"It's lovely to finally meet you in person, Sophia," said the Duchess. "You're twenty-two, if I'm not mistaken?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Sophia replied.

"I was but a year younger than you when I married my husband," the Duchess said with a tender look at the Duke. "Richard is only three years older than you. This is your sister's first Season, is it not?"

Richard could tell his mother was scrambling for things to say. He didn't blame her—Sophia wasn't exactly a conventional woman. What interested other women probably did not interest her.

"Yes, Your Grace," Sophia replied without a hint of a smile

Were those the only words the woman would use? Richard glanced at his mother, who was smiling harder than he had ever seen her smile.

"Do you hunt, Mr Emley?" the Duke asked.

"Not as much as I used to, I'm afraid," said Mr Emley. "Do you?"

“Whenever I get the chance to. My wife feels that an autumn wedding would be best for our children, and I'm inclined to agree with her. It will give us time to hunt on our estate. Our country estate has some of the best hunting grounds and fishing spots in England.”

“I've heard such rumours,” Mr Emley replied. “I look forward to experiencing it first-hand.”

The parents continued to speak as Richard darted looks at Sophia, waiting for her to look a little interested in the conversation. Instead, the woman hardly spoke, and at one point even asked to walk around the room to look at the paintings.

The Duchess suggested that Richard walk with her around the room, but Sophia quickly declined that offer. Far be it from him to insist on accompanying a woman who hardly paid him any attention and was intent upon being as unaccommodating as possible. Richard felt annoyed with her, but he still caught himself watching her as she walked past each piece of artwork, paying each one a few minutes of her attention.

I have never thought those paintings were particularly fascinating. Indeed, I cannot recall anyone preferring the company of inanimate objects over that of people. Is it any wonder society thinks her odd?

Eventually, Sophia came to the end of the row and had to return to her seat. Richard observed her from the corner of his eye, waiting to see what she would do next.

“Are you interested in art, dear?” the Duchess asked.

"I find it an engaging skill, Your Grace," Sophia replied. "I only wish that I could paint as well as the artists who created your paintings."

"Oh, do not be so modest, Sophia," said Mrs Emley. "Sophia is an accomplished artist and loves to draw and paint. 'Tis one of her favourite past times."

Richard wasn't surprised. Sophia was accomplished in everything but social etiquette, which actually mattered. What was the use of intelligence in a woman if it didn't aid in her being approachable and accepted by her peers? Sophia might as well have been an imbecile.

"I would love to see some of your work, Sophia dear," the Duchess said, sounding genuine. "I love art and might commission you to create something for me. I would love my corgis to be immortalised in a painting that catches their spirit, but every artist I've asked has given me renditions of what they think I should like. I have an attic filled with useless paintings."

Sophia's eyes lit up, and a shadow of a smile curved her full lips just a bit. "I would love to do so, Your Grace. I have done paintings of my own animals. Mainly my Great Danes, but I've painted our other pets as well."

She owned Great Danes? Strangely, the dogs fitted Sophia well. Richard couldn't imagine her with cheeky little dogs that yipped and yapped at a person's feet. An image of her sitting on a throne with the two dogs on either side filled Richard's mind.

The thought made him frown—did he subconsciously think of her as a regal queen? Richard had never considered that before and didn't

know if he was impressed with the idea. Perhaps the rigid way Sophia sat in her seat or the cold manner she usually employed to deal with others made him think of her as a queen. Sophia certainly had the attitude.

“How old are your Danes?” Richard found himself asking.

“Four years old, my lord,” Sophia replied, only sparing him a brief glance before she returned her focus to his mother.

“Was Elizabeth not able to accompany you?” the Duchess asked.

Richard snapped his attention to his mother, appalled that she had asked such a question. Had the woman forgotten that he had been somewhat interested in the younger Emley sister? Yes, Richard had downplayed his interest in the woman, but he had been interested nonetheless.

What did the Duchess think about him marrying the one sister but being interested in the other? Richard's mother probably assumed that he had set his affections for Elizabeth aside to marry Sophia, but that couldn't be further from the truth. If he was forced to marry any woman, Richard would have preferred it to be Elizabeth. At least he liked her, which was more than he could say for Sophia.

“She is feeling ill,” Mrs Emley said. “She didn't want to come along and ruin the evening by spoiling everything with her illness.”

Richard noticed that Sophia had become very still and didn't seem to be breathing. Her knuckles were white where her hands gripped the

armrests of the chair. Sophia was, of course, aware of his relationship with Elizabeth— she had to know what this betrothal was doing to her younger sister.

“Oh? Is it something serious?” the Duchess inquired.

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Mrs Emley assured. “She is experiencing mild symptoms, but she didn't want to take the chance of worsening as the evening progressed.”

“Perhaps we'll see her next time,” the Duchess decided. “I think it important to get to know each other as we'll be a family soon.”

Mrs Emley nodded eagerly. “I completely agree, Your Grace. I was just saying to my husband that we should use every opportunity to meet together and show a united front against the... rumours.”

The level of tension in the room rose a few notches as people shifted in their seats. The only person who remained perfectly still was Sophia. Richard couldn't even tell what she was thinking.

She would be great at playing cards. I wonder if she is interested in such games? She could be my secret weapon during. She might as well be useful.

Richard winced at his train of thought, realising how dismissive he seemed. Sophia was a person with feelings—even though she rarely displayed any of them. Thinking of her as a tool was not the best thing to do, especially when she would be the mother of his children.

Did Richard want more than one child? He hadn't really thought that far ahead yet. It was a subject he would have to speak to Sophia about, but how did a man talk to her about such things?

"On the lighter side, our children are getting married, and we'll soon be grandparents," the Duchess said too cheerfully. "Perhaps we'll have a little Hatherton by next year."

Richard pulled at his necktie, his gaze sliding to Sophia to see her reaction. The woman seemed a tad pale, but a bright pink colour soon suffused her cheeks with warmth, making her seem almost... pretty. Richard frowned. What on earth was he thinking?

"That is something to look forward to, Your Grace," Mrs Emley agreed. "It has been many years since I've heard the pitter-patter of little feet. I just know that my daughter will be a wonderful mother. She has a way with babies and children, you see. They all flock to her as soon as they see her. She is the Pied Piper of children."

Sophia liked children? Richard couldn't imagine her as warm and inviting, but if children liked her, then there had to be a part of her that wasn't what she portrayed to the rest of the world. If that were the case, why didn't she use that warmth to win her friends and garner more acceptance among her peers? Perhaps Sophia wasn't as one-dimensional as Richard had initially believed.

Chapter 7

Sophia's eyes kept travelling to the doorway. Freedom lay just outside that door, but how could she get there without causing a scene?

She inwardly sighed, knowing full well that there was no way out. The reason for her situation sat a mere few steps away from her, looking wonderfully unaffected and acting as though this interaction between their families was normal. There was nothing normal about what was happening! What was wrong with everyone?

“Sophia,” she heard her mother say in a slightly desperate voice.

What was wrong now? Couldn't they leave her alone? She turned to her mother, noticing that everyone was looking at her. What had she missed?

“Yes, Mama?”

“Dear, did you not hear us speaking to you?”

Sophia slowly looked around the room, wondering who had asked her a question. She guessed it was the Duchess from how her mother kept giving her 'you're in trouble' eyes.

“Forgive me, but I was thinking about painting your corgis, Your Grace” she lied.

The Duchess smiled, her teeth showing. "Indeed? What ideas do you have?"

"Uh... I could paint them in the garden," Sophia said, scrambling for an idea. "Or perhaps at your feet."

The Duchess clapped her hands. "That sounds lovely, dear. I love the idea of having them at my feet or even the garden. When do you think you could come to see me again to talk further about it?"

Sophia hadn't anticipated the Duchess being so serious about this. Goodness! The last thing Sophia needed was another visit to Richard's home.

"I'm sure we could come up with a day," Sophia said as vaguely as she could.

"Next week would suit me perfectly!" the Duchess declared.

Sophia inwardly groaned. "Yes, of course, Your Grace."

What on earth had she gotten herself into now? Sophia had just made a commitment to see the Duchess again, which was more than she had wanted. It was probably wishful thinking on her side, believing that she could avoid Richard's mother indefinitely when she was marrying the her son, but a woman was entitled to it once in a while.

Thankfully, a servant came in to announce that dinner was ready, putting an end to the conversation. A relief, considering Sophia would have likely found herself having to agree to several more meetings otherwise. By how her mother kept talking about the wedding, however, Sophia was confident she would accompany the Emley matriarch to several meetings with the Duchess. When had her life been reduced to discussions about becoming the next Countess of Brittingham and her wedding to the earl?

Oh yes—since Richard kissed her and turned her life upside down. Sophia had often heard women gushing over 'that one kiss' that could change a person's life. Well, that one kiss had certainly changed Sophia's life, and not for the better.

“Escort your fiancée, Richard,” the Duchess ordered.

Sophia wanted to protest, but one look from her mother was enough to shut her up. Glaring at the arm Richard offered her, she gingerly placed her hand atop his forearm, hesitating when she felt rising heat through his sleeve. It made her palm tingle a little, and Sophia considered moving away, but she knew everyone was watching her.

Keeping her hand on Richard's arm, Sophia started walking without him. Richard had to take a few quick steps to catch up to her and keep her hand in place, but he didn't complain. Sophia assumed it would probably hurt his pride to claim that she was acting as though she didn't want to touch him, and he would be right to think that. The last time they had touched had launched her into this mess.

Richard took Sophia to her seat, pulling it out and tucking her in like the perfect gentleman. She mumbled her thanks, already wanting to

stuff her mouth with something so she would have an excuse not to talk; she didn't trust herself to remain polite for the whole night.

Chestnut soup was served first, followed by mackerel covered in butter and herbs. Sophia was glad she was allowed to eat the two courses without any questions sent her way. However, her luck eventually ran out when the Duchess addressed her directly.

"Do you have any requests for the celebratory wedding breakfast, dear? We will have all the traditional food, but I wanted to know if there was anything that you would like that might not be included."

If only the Duchess knew that Sophia had absolutely no interest in marrying her son.

"I'm confident that whatever Your Grace and my mother decide to serve will be perfect, " she said, then added, "I'm not fussy about food."

"You seem to be an easy person to impress, my dear," the Duchess remarked.

Richard snorted, drawing everyone's attention. He quickly turned it into a cough and took a sip of wine, but Sophia was aware that the man had found his mother's words amusing. It didn't surprise her that Richard assumed her to be a difficult person; anyone who didn't fall for his charms would be a difficult person to deal with in his eyes.

"I like to think so, Your Grace," Sophia answered, sliding a look at Richard.

Wisely, the young man didn't make any more foolish noises, but his expression was dubious. What did it matter what he thought about her? He was just like any other person on this earth—except these select few Sophia actually appreciated .

Several roasts were served with an assortment of vegetables, gravy and pies. The Duke stood up to carve the roasts, offering generous slices to everyone. Sophia soon found herself with more meat than she usually ate but didn't complain. She simply tucked into her meal, keeping her head down while the conversation flowed around her.

“You do not need to finish everything on your plate, Miss Emley,” said Richard.

Sophia paused, turning her head to him. “I beg your pardon, my lord?”

“You looked overwhelmed when you saw the amount of meat on your plate,” the earl explained. “You do not need to finish it all.”

What was it to him? “I'll do whatever I please, my lord. Thank you.”

Richard pulled his head back as though she had slapped him. “I just thought...”

“Do not worry about thinking, my lord. Men like you just have to look pretty.”

Sophia stilled as soon as the words had left her mouth. She hadn't meant to say anything of the sort, but she would only embarrass herself if she took them back.

Ignoring the shocked look on Richard's face, she returned to her meal and forked a large piece of tender beef into her mouth. There, that should keep her quiet for a while. Why was she feeling so bad about her comment? Richard had likely said worse things about her to his friends, the very same ones who kept taunting her and treating her like a scandalous woman who had stolen Richard's virtue. She snorted inwardly—did the man have any to begin with?

“You're rather quick with those retorts, Miss Emley,” Richardsaid. “Although I should start calling you Sophia. It wouldn't make sense to others to hear me address you so formally considering our relationship.”

Relationship? What relationship? Sophia finished chewing her food, taking her time while she thought of a fitting response. She looked around the table and, finding the others engaged in conversation, turned to Richard.

"Do not talk to me about relationships, my lord," she snapped, speaking under her breath. "Ours is just a business transaction to please our families—nothing more, nothing less. Now, if you please, I wish to eat my meal in peace. I'd prefer not to get indigestion."

“What are you two discussing there?” the Duchess questioned. “You seem to be deep in conversation.”

“We're talking about the upcoming ball, Mother,” Richard answered.

Sophia pulled her eyebrows together as she swished a piece of carrot in the sweet buttery sauce it had come in. Part of her had been certain he would say something to point the finger at her, but he went in another direction with his answer. Why? Wouldn't it help him to paint her in an awful light and hopefully put an end to this farce of a wedding?

They had months to go before the ceremony, giving Richard every opportunity to prove her unfit to become the next Countess of Brittingham. Sophia was actually counting on him doing just that because her hands were tied. There was not a thing Sophia could do to change the situation. Well, nothing except one thing that would ruin her forever.

She had discussed refusing to marry Richard and becoming a spinster to her best friend, but it would come with a heavy price. Sophia would certainly face her parents' wrath and might even be disowned by them. Should that happen, Sophia would have to find a place to stay and take up some form of employment.

Becoming a governess seemed like the best thing, but she would need a recommendation for that. Unfortunately, working in England might not be possible, so France was her next option. No one would ever know who she was, and Sophia could speak French as well as any native speaker.

“That would be your first social event as a betrothed couple,” Sophia's mother piped up then. “Unless we have a dinner party before then to introduce you. That might be better.”

"I agree, Patricia," the Duchess replied. "A dinner party with family and friends sounds like the perfect way to introduce our children as a betrothed couple. Everything has happened rather quickly, but we shouldn't skip the usual social niceties."

Somewhere between the drawing-room and dining room, everyone had come to address each other by their first names, and Sophia had missed it. Would the Duchess and Duke expect her to call them Mother and Father? That would give the engagement a sense of finality that Sophia wasn't ready for.

The mothers continued their discussion of the dinner party while the fathers carried on their own conversation about politics and hunting as though no one else was at the table. The only person paying her far too much attention was Richard.

Sophia had known he had been observing her in the drawing-room although he had tried to hide it, and he was still watching her from the corner of his eye. What did he want from her? She was no happier than he was about the situation. Sophia believed she had the greater reason to hate their circumstances because none of this was her fault.

If Richard hadn't tried to lure Elizabeth into the dark and try to kiss her, this would have never happened. What made this entire ordeal so much harder to handle was Elizabeth's overnight hatred. Sophia's sister blamed her for everything, believing that Sophia had been so desperate to marry that she had tricked Richard into kissing her that night. It didn't matter what Sophia said in her defence; Elizabeth refused to listen to reason. Was it any wonder that she was nearing her breaking point?

Dessert was served without another word from Richard, which Sophia was grateful for. She didn't know how much longer she could go

without saying something that would really cause problems. To say that she was miserable was an understatement. No, Sophia was seething beneath her polite exterior, and her anger was looking for an escape route.

Relief swept through her as dinner was finally concluded and they moved to the drawing-room for coffee. It meant that they were closer to going home, or at least that was what Sophia thought.

“Why don't you take Sophia for a walk, Richard?” his mother suggested. “It's a lovely night outside.”

Sophia's mouth gaped open slightly as she looked at the Duchess in disbelief. Had the woman lost her mind? The reason why they were in this mess was because of a night-time meeting in the garden!

“That's not necessary, Your Grace,” Sophia said when Richard didn't respond. “I can see the garden on another day.”

The operative word being *day*. Sophia never wanted to be alone with Richard ever again, let alone think about being his wife.

“Nonsense, dear,” her mother lightly chided. “You and Richard need a little time to get to know each other, but let's not have a repeat of the last time you were alone together.”

Sophia's face heated to the point that she knew her skin had turned lobster red. Did her mother have to suggest that they would repeat what happened the last time? Sophia had never put a foot out of place until Richard entered and messed everything up for her.

“I would be honoured to show Sophia around the garden,” said Richard, standing.

Sophia wanted to tell him to sit down and keep quiet, but she had to settle on glaring up at him.

“There you go, Sophia dear,” her mother said. “Go along with Richard. Do not take too long as we must go home and see if your sister has improved.”

Sophia would much rather go home, but she had no choice except to stand up and make peace with the fact that she would be alone with Richard once again. Her belly did a little somersault at the thought, making her head feel as though it wanted to take off without her. The moment passed as quickly as it had come, allowing Sophia to start walking.

She ignored Richard's arm and marched to the door, not caring if she seemed rude. Finding the garden shouldn't be too challenging. Sophia decided that she would walk through it as quickly as she could and return to the drawing-room where she could claim a headache and beg her parents to leave. It was a good plan; the only wild card was Richard. There was no telling what he would do or say next.

“Sophia!” she heard him call as she neared the closest door she assumed would lead her outside.

Ignoring him, Sophia pulled on the handle and stepped outside, feeling satisfaction when she found what she was looking for. Who

needed men?

“Sophia!” Richard called again, appearing beside her. “You’re certainly the fastest woman I’ve ever met.”

“It’s a shame that I wasn’t faster,” she replied, paying him a brief glance.

Sophia didn’t pause once but set off for the flower garden that she could pick out in the dim moonlight.

“Would you slow down a little?” he asked. “I can keep up with you easily, but how am I to show you the garden if you rush through it?”

Sophia wanted to tell him that she would enjoy the walk more without him by her side, but she bit her tongue. All she had to do was ignore him until she could return to the house.

“Are you ignoring me?” he asked. “Because it seems like it.”

Should she give him a prize? Applause? Sophia rolled her eyes. He acted as though she was being unfair, but Richard didn’t get to say what was and wasn’t unfair. He was the reason why she had become the villain, and he had become the helpless victim. Sophia had a feeling Richard had done nothing to quell those rumours either.

“What is your problem?” Richard demanded. “This isn’t easy for either of us, but your attitude is making everything much worse.”

Sophia stopped in her tracks and slowly turned to the man. Was he out of his mind? Or was he simply an imbecile?

“Excuse me?” she hissed. “Did I hear you correctly? Did you ask what *my* problem is?”

“That is precisely what I said,” Richard replied, crossing his arms. “You have been rude towards me since you stepped into the house. Is that how you treat the person you're soon to marry?”

“Don't talk to me about marriage, Richard Hatherton! None of this would have happened if you hadn't wanted my sister to sneak off and have a little rendezvous away from prying eyes. What you didn't anticipate was getting caught.”

Sophia didn't add that she had been the one caught with him and not Elizabeth. She didn't have to say it; Richard knew the story as well as she did. After all, he was there.

“If I could change that night, I would,” Richard claimed, running a hand through his hair.

“Oh, I do not doubt that one bit,” Sophia replied with a harsh laugh. “You hate the fact that you're saddled with me, but I'm glad it wasn't Elizabeth who was caught with you. Do you understand that you would have put my sister in a compromising situation and possibly ruined her? She actually has a future ahead of her, my lord. I'm the one who was set aside before I even had a chance to spread my wings. I have always been the expendable one. I just never knew how

expendable I was until you walked into my life and destroyed it.”

Her parents had thrown her at Richard's feet the moment they had heard about the scandal. Sophia still didn't know if they were trying to save her reputation or relieved that they could force her on someone to avoid the shame of having a spinster for a daughter. She doubted her parents would ever claim the latter reason, but it was undoubtedly on their minds.

“I destroyed your life?” asked a gobsmacked Richard. “How do you suppose I did that?”

Was he so obtuse that he couldn't see the role he had played? Sophia had never taken the Lord Brittingham for a simpleton; perhaps he wasn't used to confrontations with women.

“Are you so blind to everything?” she asked him. “Are you so self-centred that you cannot see your wrongs?”

“I made a mistake when I mistook you for Elizabeth, for which I'm sorry,” Richard began. “But surely you cannot keep returning to that one fault over and over again? That will make you a bitter woman.”

Sophia's mouth gaped as her mind struggled to come to terms with what Richard had said. Was he calling her bitter? The nerve of the man! How would he have reacted if the roles had been reversed? Frankly, she was surprised he wasn't fighting this marriage with every fibre of his being.

She had mentioned the matter to Rose, who had very delicately put

forth the idea that Richard probably intended to keep a mistress. Most men in his position had them, apparently. That had been one of the most horrifying news to date. Sophia had not even wanted to ask how Rose had come by this information and had asked her friend to change the subject.

Marriage was a sacred bond. It didn't matter that the husband and wife did not love each other! The fact remained that they had spoken binding vows before God and were forever seen as one rather than two. It didn't matter that Sophia had long ago accepted that she would never marry; marriage was still a commitment that had to be honoured.

This was how Sophia had seen it for all her life, but hearing that people indulged in affairs had tinged her idyllic view of marriage with a red brush.

"Calling me a bitter woman will not change who and what you are, Lord Brittingham," Sophia said carefully. "But it certainly confirms my every belief about your kind."

"My kind?" Richard repeated, raising his eyebrows. "What do you mean by that?"

Sophia realised this was her chance of getting everything off her chest and expressing the feelings that threatened to bubble over and expose how she wasn't handling the situation. She knew that she appeared calm and composed on the surface, but Sophia was screaming on the inside. It was amazing that she hadn't torn her hair out or gone running through the woods until she was certain that no one could find her and drag her back home.

With a quick look around to surveil their location, Sophia confirmed that no one was within earshot. What she was about to say was not meant for anyone but the man standing before her.

"You give new meaning to the class of snivelling, weak-minded men, my lord," she spat out. "How dare you call me a bitter woman? How dare you make light of this horrible situation we're in?"

Richard blinked hard, his head jerking as though he couldn't make sense of what she was saying.

"Now, wait just a minute, Sophia," he said, pointing a finger at her.

"I suggest you put down that finger before you lose it, my lord," she warned.

Richard immediately retracted it and hid his hand behind his back. At least the man was smart enough to follow direct commands.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked. "This is not normal behaviour for a woman."

Sophia laughed at that. "Not normal behaviour, he says," she said more to herself. "Does he know what normal looks like?"

"Talking to yourself is usually evidence of a demented mind," Richard claimed. "I don't think you're demented, Sophia. What is going on with you? I know you're a difficult person to get along with, but even

this is excessive for you.”

“Why, you spoilt, weak, condescending man!” Sophia breathed. “How dare you tell me who I am? You know absolutely nothing about me beyond those stupid assumptions all those small-minded people make of me.”

“Are you not doing the same?” Richard asked. “Aren't you judging me?”

Was he trying to turn the tables on her? “Are you denying that you are the reason behind this scandal? The reason why I have to marry a man I do not even like? What sort of weakling are you?”

Sophia took several steps away from Richard, gripping her elbows. She could hardly think through her anger. She needed to get herself under control if she hoped to give Richard a piece of her mind. The man needed to know precisely how she felt about the entire situation.

She took a deep breath and turned to him. “I do not like you, and you do not like me—that we can agree upon. I'm not the one who got us into this mess. You did. You decided to throw caution to the wind and plan a meeting with my sister so you could kiss her. I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time because I was running away from the ball. I had no notion of what you were about to do. The last time I saw you and my sister was when you were together on the ballroom floor, for goodness' sake! All I had wanted to do was get away from the judging eyes and find a quiet place to sit and read.”

Sophia paused as she recalled the events of that night. Everything had been as normal as they come right up until the kiss. How was she supposed to know that hiding in the garden would cost her freedom?

"Suddenly, this odd gust of wind comes out of nowhere and blows my lamp out until all I could see were shadows. Then you appeared like some phantom of doom after nearly scaring me to death when you stepped on those twigs. How should I have reacted to a shadowy figure approaching me in the dark? I wanted to run, but my feet were stuck to the ground. I didn't even register that it was you who was speaking until it was too late!"

The kiss had been the only thing that had given her the ability to run away, but it had already been too late by then. Sophia still didn't know who had spied on them and spread the rumour. Had they actually bothered to look properly, they would have seen that Sophia had been an unwilling person.

"Now, my life is ruined, and it's all your fault," she continued. "You are the last person I would ever want to marry, Lord Brittingham. I know that other women would likely kill to be in my position, but I would gladly give it up without argument. I have no desire to marry such a spineless man whose only claim to fame is his beauty."

There! At last she had said what had sat on her heart like a heavy boulder.

Richard had not interrupted her monologue and looked like a man who had had the carpet pulled out from underneath him.

"Would you rather be a spinster?" he asked. "This is the only way that you'll ever get married, Sophia. I thought you would have been more grateful than this."

He expected her to be grateful? “I should be grateful about marrying a man like you?”

Richard nodded. “Yes, that is precisely what I think.”

“Then you're a bigger fool than I thought. There are worse things than being a spinster, my lord. If you will excuse me.”

Sophia didn't spare Richard a backward glance as she marched off and returned to the drawing-room where she informed her parents of a headache and her need to return home. They, fortunately, agreed with her and thanked the Duke and Duchess profusely before getting into their carriage and driving away.

As she rested her head on the seat and thought about the evening, Sophia knew this wouldn't be her last meeting with Richard. But oh, how she wished it was.

Chapter 8

Why were some women so complicated? They were the one area where Richard had felt confident about his abilities to woo them. Sophia had turned that on its head.

“Will you drink that brandy, or continue to nurse it?” his father asked then.

Richard looked the older man's way and raised his glass to him before taking a sip. He hadn't wanted the drink in the first place, but his father had insisted. The Duke wanted to discuss something, but had been dragging his feet about it. Richard's patience was wearing thin; he had other pressing matters to worry about.

“So,” the Duke began. “Your fiancée is an interesting woman.”

Richard nearly snorted. That was putting it lightly, and his father knew it. Interesting was not the word he would use to describe Sophia.

“Sophia is many things, Father,” Richard replied vaguely. “But perhaps we can set aside the word 'interesting'. It doesn't do her any justice.”

“Yes, I think so,” the Duke agreed. “She didn't say much at dinner yesterday, but something tells me that she is an intelligent woman. What do you know about her? I'm afraid I've only heard a few things here and there. Not the kind sort, I might add.”

Richard knew about the rumours since his own friends were part of the group spreading them. He had never actively taken part in the scuttlebutt, but he had never told his friends to hold their tongues either. Richard was as much to blame for making Sophia some sort of social pariah, and now she would become his wife. How was he going to stand by and let them badmouth his own wife?

"Is there any reason why we're discussing this now?" Richard asked.

Perhaps he sounded impertinent, but he was uncomfortable speaking about Sophia to his parents.

"I wanted to know how you feel about her," the Duke replied. "It cannot be easy marrying a woman you do not particularly like. I know you were interested in her sister."

Richard's eyes widened a bit. This was the first time that Elizabeth had been acknowledged since his parents questioned him about his interest in her. Richard had wondered if his parents would remember the younger Emley sister. Apparently, they had.

"Yes," Richard admitted. "Elizabeth was the woman I was interested in, but you and Mother disapproved. Sophia is Elizabeth's sister, and yet you're ready to welcome her. Why?"

"Isn't it obvious, son? Sophia's reputation was compromised, and we owed it to her to save it," the Duke explained. "Honour means a lot to us Hathertons, and we try to uphold it however we can. Marrying Sophia is the right thing to do. She would not have been one of our

choices, but I will say she has a better head on her shoulders than most of the women you have had a brief dalliance with."

A better head on her shoulders? The woman was insane! She had nearly taken off his own head yesterday when all he had wanted to do was have a peaceful evening. They could have reached some sort of understanding to make the transition from acquaintances to husband and wife a smooth one, but Sophia had had other ideas.

"Sophia certainly doesn't think like most women," said Richard. "She is...a difficult woman to deal with."

The Duke surprised him by throwing his head back and laughing. "I think it's about time that you have a difficult woman to please, son. You have become too accustomed to women falling at your feet, but Sophia is not like that at all. A little humility will not hurt you."

That wasn't what Richard wanted to hear. Sophia had called him many things and questioned his manhood until it lay in shreds at her feet. He had never had a woman attack him and then walk away without the slightest remorse.

"If you frown any harder, you'll turn that brandy into beer," his father remarked. "Drink up and try to look on the bright side, son. You no longer need to look for a wife, and Sophia looks like a woman capable of continuing the Hatherton line. Her mother said that she would make a wonderful mother. What more can you ask for?"

"Attraction?" said Richard.

"Beauty isn't everything and it's often in the eye of the beholder. Sophia might become the most beautiful woman to you in time. It shouldn't matter what others think, only what you think about her. Get to know her, be friends with her and give her a chance to show you what her family sees. I admit that Sophia isn't a beautiful woman, but she has qualities about her that make her a striking young woman. Perhaps she would have been lovely had she been born in another era, one that would have appreciated her type of beauty."

Richard doubted that. An overly generous mouth was not seen as attractive by anyone he knew. Sophia's lips looked more like the ones he had once seen on a Mulatto woman. Sophia's nose had a slight piggish look to it that Richard found unattractive, and the freckles across her nose and cheeks further drove the idea home that she was simply not a beauty.

Richard had to admit that her eyes were striking with their dark brown colour and long eyelashes, but that was about it. It was a shame that one feature could not make up for the rest.

"We'll have to agree to disagree, Father. I cannot imagine anyone thinking Sophia is beautiful, but I suppose crazier things have happened."

"Such as kissing the wrong woman and being caught doing it?" the Duke asked with one cocked eyebrow.

Richard groaned. "Must you remind me at every turn? My mind rarely lets me forget it."

"Reminding you is the least of your concerns, son. You're marrying the woman in a few months-- that's all the reminder you need."

Had his father called him just to rub the drama in his face? “Yes. A woman who hates me,” he muttered.

“Hate is a strong word,” his father said.

“It's an apt word for how my fiancée feels about me. I never thought I would marry a woman who hates me, Father. There is something wrong about that.”

Richard put his drink down and walked to his father's ship models. The Duke had a love for ships and owned a few that merchants rented on a yearly basis. It was one of the few forms of passive income that had filled the family coffers until they were bursting out of their enclosures.

Their farms across England and Scotland brought in a tidy sum as well, making the Hathertons one of the wealthiest nobles in Europe. Of course, one that rich always had to pay the price. Richard's father often had to 'donate' a sum of money to King George, and now the Prince Regent, to help the monarch live his lavish lifestyle. Richard would have preferred the money to go to the soldiers and their families, but the mere citizens did not get to choose once the country's monarch had spoken and decreed.

"I believe Sophia is angry, son," the Duke insisted. "Her choices were taken away from her, and she blames you for it. I do think it foolish of her to hold on to little details like that, but I cannot judge her either."

If only his father knew how Sophia had judged him! “Angry or not, I

saw hatred in her eyes yesterday. They might have to drag her up the aisle spitting and screaming.”

The Duke chuckled. “That would be an interesting scene to witness, but I doubt it will happen. Sophia is an intelligent woman who loves her family. She wouldn't do anything to embarrass them.”

Richard supposed that was something. "You're right. She wouldn't do anything to draw attention to her family."

Him, on the other hand... Richard was a little afraid of a woman who wasn't enthralled with his charms. He had never come across someone who wanted nothing to do with him, let alone stand near him!

Sophia had done everything to avoid touching him, but something had happened when she had put her hands on his arm. Richard didn't know how to explain the bizarre feeling of her gloved palm on his arm, but he could have sworn that he felt Sophia's warmth right through the layers of material that had separated their bare skin.

“Drink up and smile, son,” his father insisted. “You have a few months left of being a single man. At least enjoy it, but do not do anything that will bring more scandal to the family. One was enough.”

Richard took his glass and tapped it against his father's before drinking the brandy in one gulp. He hissed as he felt the familiar burn course down his throat.

“Good brandy, Father.”

“Thank you. Good alcohol is one of the things I pride myself on. I imagine you have other things to do now.”

Which was his father's way of saying that the conversation was over. Richard grinned and left the Duke's study. He did have a few things to do, but he couldn't concentrate on them right now. Knowing that a woman hated him should anger him, but Richard was more intrigued.

Who expected to have a wife that despised him right off the bat? Richard didn't want to marry Sophia any more than she wanted to marry him, but a wedding was a definite. Nicholas had said to make the best of the situation, and what better way than to challenge himself to make Sophia like him before they spoke their vows?

Richard didn't want people knowing that he was marrying a woman who couldn't stand the sight of him. It was a point of pride for him. Did this make him the shallow person Sophia assumed him to be? Richard didn't think so. Having standards did not make a person shallow. He had been polite towards her, hadn't he?

“I've never mistreated a woman in my life, and I'm not about to start now,” he said to himself. “Sophia merely needs to see a different side to me.”

But how?

* * *

Several days later, Richard sat with a pen and paper with every intention of sending a short note to Sophia, but he had to take a step back and evaluate his decision. He wanted to call on Sophia, but he also might run into Elizabeth.

“Well, it's safe to say that my idea is firmly rejected,” he muttered, crumpling the still clear paper.

It was such a waste, but his frustration needed an outlet. Going to the Emley's house would rub his engagement to Sophia in Elizabeth's face, which Richard execrated.

Sighing, he put his head on his desk, banging it against the wood.

“What on earth are you doing, Richard?” his mother asked from the doorway.

Richard lifted his head, rubbing at the slight sting on it. "I'm composing ideas."

"What sort of ideas?" the Duchess asked, crossing the threshold of the room.

Richard didn't want to tell his mother anything about his need to see Sophia again. She would assume he was warming up to the woman when all he wanted to do was make the woman like him.

“It's not important. Was there something you needed to see me

about?"

"Yes, actually. You're essentially courting Sophia, but you've hardly spent any time with her. Don't you think it important to see more of her?"

And just like that, Richard had an idea. "I agree with you, Mother. Why don't you invite Sophia to the house tomorrow?"

"I hoped you would say that," his mother said, clearly pleased. "We can make an afternoon of it. Of course, I'll invite Patricia as well so we can discuss the wedding."

That's all his mother ever spoke about these days. Just how much did women have to talk about wedding details?

"I'm sure Mrs Emley will be happy. Will you send the invitation now?"

The Duchess nodded. "The earlier, the better. I'll use your stationery if you don't mind."

Richard pushed the writing pad and pen towards her. A footman was summoned moments later and sent to personally deliver the note to Sophia. Now, it was just a matter of waiting. Richard knew Sophia wouldn't be able to say no without appearing rude, but he had a feeling she would show her feelings towards him the first chance she had.

Not if I manage to disarm her with my charming ways first.

* * *

Richard made sure that he looked his best the next day, even earning him a backhanded compliment from his usually unobservant father. The Duke wasn't one to notice clothing unless it looked outlandish, so to receive a good word from him let Richard know that he looked handsome. Maybe too handsome.

"Where are you off to looking like that?" the man asked. "There isn't some event that I've forgotten, is there?"

"Not at all, Father. I thought it would be good for me to show my future wife what she'll be getting once she marries me."

The Duke looked at him for several seconds and promptly burst out laughing. "Sophia has made you the woman of the relationship, son."

"What? No!" Richard denied. "There is nothing wrong with a man dressing up to impress his fiancée, Father. I'm sure you did the same thing."

"You look like a dandy, son. I never had to try that hard to attract your mother's attention. Are you certain your attire will achieve the results you're looking for?"

Richard had to admit that he was slightly overdressed, but his father

didn't have to make him feel terrible about it.

“Very well. I'll go and change into something simpler.”

“You do that, son. This outfit might have worked on a woman like Elizabeth, but Sophia doesn't strike me as a woman who looks at physical beauty as much as she looks at the inner man. I advise that you show her that you're not just a pretty face.”

Richard grimaced, frowning at his father. “That's a line you feed women, not men.”

“I know, but Sophia isn't just any woman, is she?” the Duke said, and went on his way.

Richard had a feeling that being the man of the house would not be easy if Sophia didn't accept him as her husband. She would carry his name, but that didn't mean she would be easy to rule over. Richard slowly climbed the stairs to his room, wondering how to tackle Sophia. The woman had to have a weakness, and he meant to find out what it was.

Sophia and her mother arrived precisely on time and were shown into the main parlour, where tea and an assortment of cakes and sandwiches were put out. Sophia had managed to avoid him taking her hand or sitting near him. That didn't matter because Richard still had the entire afternoon.

“I'm so glad you could come, Patricia,” said the Duchess. “We still have so much more to discuss!”

"I was happy to come, Diana," Mrs Emley insisted. "I was just telling Sophia in the carriage that we felt right at home during dinner the other night. You and your family are so inviting. Isn't that so, Sophia?"

"Yes, Mama," Sophia replied dutifully.

The Duchess personally served the tea, which was something she usually didn't do. That said a lot about the respect she had for the Emleys. Perhaps she was truly trying to forge a good relationship with them. If only Sophia thought the same way.

"How many cubes do you take, Sophia?" the Duchess asked.

"Two, Your Grace."

"Just like Richard. Perhaps you'll find that you're very much like him."

Sophia smiled, but it looked more like she had just swallowed something distasteful. Even admitting to being similar in some ways was unacceptable for her. Goodness, but she was difficult. Why did he find that strangely exhilarating? Something had to be wrong with him.

"I doubt Richard is as strong-willed as my daughter," Mrs Emley said, laughing. "Sophia never backs down from anything if she believes it is right or a good cause. Nothing shakes her morals."

“Richard is the same,” the Duchess replied. “But he tends to use his charms to makes everyone around him believe that he is right. I do not know where he gets such skill because his father was not as charming when I met him.”

“You are charming, Mother,” Richard remarked. “I must have inherited the trait from you.”

The Duchess laughed. “I suppose you're right, son. Although I do not think you'll be able to charm Sophia so easily. I would say you've met your match.”

“I couldn't agree with you more, Diana!” said Mrs Emley, chuckling away. “Perhaps fate brought them together for this very reason.”

Richard didn't think fate had anything to do with it, although he did use that excuse every now and then. This situation was simply a case of mistaken identity. Besides, why would fate wish to bring together two people who were like chalk and cheese? Or milk and brandy?

Sophia didn't appear bothered by the conversation as she sat drinking her tea and looking out of the window. She hadn't touched the pastries and only taken a small bite of a sandwich. Perhaps she had eaten at home or was taking a stand against getting comfortable in his home. Whatever the reason, Richard had had enough. He wanted to shout at her to stop avoiding him at every turn and all but ignoring him when he was sitting merely a few steps away from her.

Oh, Sophia was oh-so polite, but her manner was so painful and careful that he wanted to ruffle her feathers and see more of the

woman who had given him a verbal beating the other night. Sophia had revealed more about herself than he had ever witnessed, and it had forced him to see her in a different light. Now, he wanted her to see him in a different light.

"Mother, why don't I take Sophia on a tour of the house?" he suggested. "This will one day be her home, and it would be my pleasure to show her around."

Richard had kept his eye on Sophia while he spoke to his mother. He noticed how she placed the teacup on the saucer a little harder than she probably should have.

"Why, that is a fantastic idea!" the Duchess exclaimed. "I'm surprised I didn't think of it sooner."

"I'm sure Sophia would love to go on a tour," Mrs Emley added. "She's interested in architecture, history, and art, all of which your home has."

"But it's not necessary," Sophia insisted with some strain showing through her voice. "I'm certain there will be another day to do so."

"You're here now, Sophia," Richard said with a smug smile. "I'd be honoured to give you a brief history lesson along with the tour. The Hathertons have been in this house for several centuries, after all."

Two, to be exact. Their country estate boasted a long history of six hundred years, making them one of the oldest nobles in the area.

“Go along, dear,” Mrs Emley pressed. “Diana and I have much to talk about that would only bore you. Go with Richard.”

Richard watched Sophia struggle within herself, and for a moment, he thought she would refuse, but she set her cup and saucer down and stood. She would have walked past him, but Richard made it a point of taking her hand and putting it on his arm. Sophia tried to pull away, but he held on, giving her hand a slight squeeze to show that he would not relinquish his hold.

Richard heard her soft intake of breath before her hand curled over his forearm and showed her own strength. It was a warning, but if Sophia expected it to scare him, she was sorely misguided. Her actions had only excited him. When last had he felt such a grand challenge? It had been years!

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“You have my hand, my lord,” Sophia replied dryly. “I go wherever you go.”

Richard could tell the woman was being sarcastic, but some insane part of him liked what Sophia had said. What was wrong with him? He responded by patting her hand and leading them forward, taking care to keep his hold on her. The woman could bolt at any second.

As soon as they left the room, she stopped walking. “You can dispense with the show, my lord, and give me back my hand. I do not need to be led around like some child.”

“I thought that I was leading my fiancée around the house.”

Sophia rolled her eyes. "Please, do not talk like that when we're alone. It's unnecessary. We both know that we do not see each other in that way. Now, just show me what you wanted to show me, and I can leave."

Prickly little thing, wasn't she? Richard picked up their ambling pace again, keeping her hand in place. Sophia sighed, but at least she didn't try to fight him. Richard was strong, but he wasn't sure who would win the battle over her hand placement. Sophia Emley was not a woman he wished to underestimate.

“I must say that your blue dress becomes you,” he said some moments later.

Sophia scoffed. "If you're going to pay a compliment, at least be honest about it. I cannot abide by liars."

Was he lying? The soft blue of the muslin material complemented her skin well and accentuated her young body. Sophia Emley wasn't pretty, but she was in better shape than most women.

It must be all that running she does.

“I meant what I said,” Richard affirmed. “Your dress looks lovely on your form. It complements your skin tone and the colour of your hair.”

Sophia frowned but said nothing. She probably didn't believe him and thought it better to keep quiet than argue over her physical appearance. Most women would have milked that compliment for all it was worth, but not Sophia. She wanted to avoid it.

"The west wing of the house was once burnt down in a fire," he said, pointing at the section. "If you look closely, you'll see that it looks newer than the rest of the house."

Sophia looked but made no comment. Was he boring her? Her mother had said that she was interested in history. Perhaps it was his history that Sophia wasn't keen to know.

"So, you have Great Danes for pets? Those are rather big dogs for a woman to have."

"I don't think so."

Richard waited for her to say something else, but that was it. Didn't she notice how he was trying to make conversation? For heaven's sake, she needed to at least try to get along!

"There's a room in the house that we could turn into a place where you can do all your art," he said, hoping the idea would please her. "It has good lighting and plenty of space to store your canvases, paints, and easels."

“I see.”

Richard closed his eyes for a moment. This was going to be more challenging than he thought, but he wasn't going to give up.

“I imagine you enjoy reading—we have a well-stocked library in this house, but the one at our country estate is far more impressive. A person could easily spend hours and days in it.”

“That sounds lovely, my lord.”

“Call me Richard, please,” he pressed. “It seems odd to call you Sophia while you address me so formally.”

“I like it this way.”

“Why?”

“Why what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Why be difficult about this?”

Sophia raised one dark eyebrow, a smirk appearing at the corner of her mouth. “Difficult, you say? I haven't even started to be difficult, my lord. Are we done with the tour?”

It was on the tip of Richard's tongue to say yes, they were done with the tour and good riddance, but that was what Sophia was expecting. If he did the opposite, no matter how annoyed he was, it would surprise her.

“Not yet,” he said with a smile. “We still have a few more spots to look at. Shall we?”

Sophia paid him a brief startled look, but it was enough to give Richard the encouragement he needed to continue with his plan. He just needed a little more time to show Sophia that he wasn't the self-entitled man she believed he was. Time was on his side, after all.

Chapter 9

Sophia sent covert looks at the man beside her. What was he up to? She had expected Richard to turn around and return to the parlour after her last remark, but the man kept talking about the house as though nothing she said could deter him.

“The servants' quarters are down the hall,” said Richard, pointing. “The top floor and this section houses most of the servants, but we have a few who live in their own homes. The same goes for our country estate servants.”

Sophia was actually interested in what Richard was saying, but she didn't want to be; she wanted nothing of or about him to interest her. From the moment that her betrothal to Richard was announced, Sophia had decided that she would never fall for his charms. She had witnessed how foolish women became around him, including her own sister.

Elizabeth was so obsessed with Richard that it had clouded her judgement and turned her against her own sister. How could a man do that? Sophia had watched Elizabeth grow up, for heaven's sake! She knew her better than anyone else could and had been with her through every milestone in her life. How had her own sister turned against her despite all they were to each other?

“We only have two chefs in London, but four in the countryside with four kitchens for them to work in,” Richard continued. “It just makes it easier for everyone.”

“Why?” she found herself asking.

"Too many cooks spoil the broth or something to that effect. Each chef deals with specific parts of the meal to avoid confusion. One might deal with fish, another with meat, another with dessert, and another with soup. It makes parties run smoother. Each chef has designated servants to help peel, chop, and whatever else happens in the kitchen. I'm not all that knowledgeable about that section in the house."

Richard moved on, talking about the different rooms and how his mother had named them all according to her favourite authors, which Sophia found charming. Maybe she should start doing that as well.

"My mother wanted to name my room after Shakespeare, but my father put a stop to that. He had an objection to giving the room such a name and begged my mother to reconsider. They couldn't decide on a name, so my room is the only one in the house without one."

Sophia had a few ideas to give his room, but didn't voice them. She wasn't supposed to be interested in what he was saying. Richard offered to introduce her to some of the servants, but Sophia quickly declined.

"Wouldn't it be better if they got to know you now?" he asked.

"Why should it matter?"

Two lines appeared between his eyebrows as his eyes searched hers. "You'll be the mistress of the house one day. It's important for the servants to understand this."

Sophia understood this, but she wanted Richard to give up on whatever he was doing and let her go.

I do not understand what he has up his sleeve. Surely he must know that I do not wish to be around him? Does he finally feel guilty about landing me in this predicament? I'm not simply going to give in because he is slathering on the charm as though his very life depended on it.

Sophia was tired of fighting and defending herself to everyone and everything just to keep her head afloat. However, she knew that if she gave Richard an inch, he would take her whole arm. She contemplated ignoring him and just continuing with the tour, but Sophia decided that knowing what Richard was up to was more important right now.

“What is going on, Richard?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

"Do not pretend to not know what I am talking about. What is all of this?" she demanded, waving her hand at him. "Why are you nicer and more understanding than usual?"

Richard tilted his head, his eyes piercing her with their intensity. “I would think that's abundantly obvious, Sophia. And I thank you for calling me Richard.”

She had? Sophia went over her words and found that she had

addressed him by his first name. It hadn't been intentional at all.

"That does not matter. I want to know why you're putting on this act. You have never wasted this much charm on me."

"As I said, I think it's obvious."

Sophia threw her hands into the air. "Oh, my goodness! Why are you going around in circles? Simply say what you mean to say."

Richard sighed and rubbed his jaw. Sophia couldn't see any stubble, but she did hear the rasping sound of skin against growing facial hair. She wanted to go up close and run her fingers along the rough part, but she wisely kept away.

"We're going to be married in a matter of months, and we have yet to reach a common ground," he said. "I'm doing all I can to show you that we do not have to be enemies. I have nothing against you, Sophia. This is a challenging situation that I wish neither of us had to go through, but we have to make the best of our situation."

Pretty words from a pretty man. Sophia still didn't know if Richard was pretty or handsome. Sometimes she thought his features were too feminine to be considered masculine, but he would give a specific look, and Sophia could suddenly see the masculinity in his physical appearance.

He is prettier than me. Mama always said that you should never marry a man prettier than you, but that's precisely what I'm being forced to do. The man has a dimple, for heaven's sake. I always feel like looking up and

waiting for the angels to sing whenever he smiles.

Sophia wasn't as immune to Richard as she pretended to be, but she certainly did not like him. He was like an expensive piece of artwork that she could admire in someone else's house, but that artwork could never be hers, and she was fine with that. However, what did one do when the painting was put in a pretty package and given to her free of charge? Run. She should run.

“How long did it take you to rehearse that speech?” she asked.

Richard's jaw clenched and unclenched. “What part of it sounded insincere? Perhaps I can fix it to make it more palatable to you.”

Oh, he was angry, wasn't he? Sophia didn't know if she had ever seen Richard angry. He usually had a ready smile for everyone.

“The truth would be a lovely break from all this false behaviour, my lord.”

"So, we're back to 'my lord', are we? And here I thought that we had made some sort of improvement. How foolish of me! One cannot win against Sophia Emley."

Win? What on earth had he expected to win? “Is this some kind of game to you? A case of winning and losing? Well, it's not to me. This is my life, and I detest that other people have a greater say over it than I do. I would not be in this mess if not for you. Next time, try to think your plans through.”

Richard's smile was crooked as he gave a little snort. "Next time? Have you forgotten that the next person I plan to kiss will be you, my fiancée? We could kiss right now and remove any later awkwardness."

Sophia gasped. She couldn't help it. "Why would you say something like that? You're not coming anywhere near me!"

Laughing bitterly, Richard turned away and leaned on a console table. "You should see your face, Sophia. You look absolutely horrified at the thought of kissing me again. I do not know why people assume that you trapped me into marriage. You can barely look at me sometimes! I have never had a woman treat me the way you do. It's unheard of."

Sophia narrowed her eyes. She finally saw Richard's behaviour for what it was. "This is about your pride, isn't it? It's not about reaching common ground and understanding each other, but the old sin of pride. You cannot stand knowing that I'm not falling at your feet like most women do." Sophia shook her head. "I cannot believe you would go to these lengths to change my opinion of you when you haven't changed one bit. Pathetic."

Richard whirled around, making her take a quick step back. "Pathetic, you say? Then answer this question for me, Miss Emley. Why didn't you run away when you saw me approaching you? When I took you in my arms and drew you close to me? When I kissed you?" he ended, his voice lowering.

Sophia's cheeks were on fire. She touched her palms to them, wanting to abscond and hide her shame. But no; Sophia was determined not to act like every other foolish girl. Richard was purposefully intimidating her and probably expected her to turn and run, but he had come up

against the wrong woman.

Lowering her hands, Sophia looked him dead in the eye. "I believe I told you the explanation behind my actions," she said, making her voice sound as cold as she could. "I was scared. Have you ever been scared before, my lord? I imagine you have at least once in your life. I was so terrified that I couldn't move, no matter how much I wanted to."

Sophia could still recall the stiffness in her body, and underneath it, the adrenaline that had waited to be released.

"Kissing me broke whatever hold had been over me, and I finally felt motion return to my limbs," she said. "I would have run away before you reached me if I hadn't been so frightened. Did you ever stop to wonder how I must have felt watching a dark shadow approach me? You're several inches taller than me, and your shoulder width is likely twice mine. To this day, I am still angry that I couldn't run when I should have, but I simply couldn't. That is the bottom line."

Sophia turned away then and crossed her arms below her bosom. She would never admit it to him, but she still felt some shame at not running away when she should have. Usually, Sophia was quick on her feet and reacted to situations faster, but that night had been an extraordinary one. If she had been as suspicious as Rose's mother, she would have believed an evil spirit had wrapped its invisible arms around her and kept her from moving.

Sophia heard Richard sigh. It wasn't one of irritation, but regret. It was interesting that a person's sigh could say so much about a their feelings or what they were thinking. Most people missed the tiny differences in the sound, but Sophia didn't. She had been studying people long enough to pick up those differences.

It was the reason why she turned around now to see if there was any regret written on his face. To her amazement, Richard looked like he was filled with crushing remorse and guilt. Had he finally come to his senses and understood where she was coming from? It seemed he did. The most amazing thing of all was that she felt sorry for him. That was the last thing she had expected to feel for Richard Hatherton.

“I owe you an apology, Sophia,” he finally said, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

An apology for what? He needed to be more specific. Was he sorry for kissing her and thereby ruining her life? Was he sorry about trying to put Elizabeth in a compromising situation? Or was he sorry that they had to lie in the bed that he had made?

“Aren't you going to say anything?” he asked.

"I'm waiting for you to elaborate on what you're apologising for. I believe that an apology cannot act as an umbrella but a pistol. You can only fire at one thing at a time, so you must apologise for one thing at a time."

Richard nodded. “I suppose you're right. I suppose I'm sorry for asking Elizabeth to meet me that night.”

“That's certainly true! Still, she was also to blame for agreeing to it when I expressly told her to not fall for your charms. It seems you had a greater influence on her than her own sister. Isn't that odd, my lord? I love my sister more than you will ever love her, but she was willing to toss that all away over a man.”

Sophia's voice broke a little at the end. Elizabeth's animosity was taking its toll on Sophia, and she had grown tired of it. She struggled to understand how the love of a man could overtake the love of a sister.

"I'm so sorry, Sophia," Richard said. "I didn't mean to come between you and your sister."

The man sounded sincere. "I believe you, but unfortunately, we cannot control everything, can we? Getting engaged to you has made me the enemy of most people. I have always known what rejection feels like, but hatred is a recent addition."

Richard winced and looked away. Why was Sophia telling him all of this anyway? She certainly didn't want Richard's pity, but part of her wanted him to understand that he had caused a lot of damage in her life. She had every right to be angry.

"We're trapped in this engagement because of me," Richard said. Sophia had the feeling he was talking primarily to himself. "I thought my plan was fool proof. How was I to know that someone else was in the garden? It was dark, for heaven's sake! Whoever saw us must have had eyes like a cat or an owl. Were they perched in a tree waiting to catch unsuspecting lovers?"

The thought of seeing one of the busybodies in a tree was enough to make her laugh. Sophia tried to hold it in, but it came out anyway. Richard looked at her, his brow creased with concern.

“What has come over you?” he asked.

Sophia tried to explain it to him, but her laughter got in the way. She finally had to walk a few paces away and compose herself, drying her face with the sleeve of her dress.

“Sophia?” said an uncertain Richard.

"I have not taken leave of my senses if that is what you think. Something you said tickled me pink, and I had to laugh."

“What did I say?”

The man sounded so confused that laughter threatened to bubble out of her again, but Sophia held it in.

"You mentioned that the peeping Tom or Judy could have been hiding in a tree. I had the image in my head, and it amused me."

“You laughed because of that?” he asked, sounding incredulous.

“I do have a sense of humour, my lord. I may be a misfit to most people, but I am sane.”

“I didn't mean to say that you're strange,” Richard quickly said.

"I know. Do not fret, my lord—it's not worth it. I believe that you're sorry about the role you had to play in landing us in this mess. At least we have established that I do not wish to marry you, and you do not want to marry me. However, our mothers are planning our wedding as we speak. We do not seem to have much say over what happens."

Richard nodded. "Yes, I know. My parents want me to protect your honour."

"I can protect my own honour, thank you very much."

The words were out of Sophia's mouth before she could consider her words. How could she have protected her honour? She was just a woman! It was a father, brother, uncle, guardian, or husband's duty to protect a woman's honour. Richard was obviously thinking the same thing because he was staring at her as though he wondered if she really believed her words.

"Do not look at me like that, my lord. I'm well aware that I cannot protect my own honour once it has been tainted. Prevention is better than cure."

"I've never heard anyone put it like that before," Richard remarked after some time.

"I think I'll say many things that you'll never hear others say," Sophia told him without a stitch of pride. "Sometimes you have to be different to see things differently."

"I'll take your word for it."

"You should. So, I take it that the tour is over?" she asked. "I think we have said everything we wished to say."

"I do not know if I achieved what I set out to do, but I'm glad we've overcome any misunderstandings."

What did he set out to do? "What did you want to achieve?"

"To become friends. Do you think we could start all over again? I do not expect us to become great friends, but marriage is inevitable between us, Sophia. We can at least be friendly towards each other. I promise to respect you as my wife and the future mother of my children."

Sophia pulled her face at the mention of children. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. The wedding is a big enough hurdle to get over without adding children to the equation. We might even be lucky enough to find a way out of this engagement."

That was what Sophia wanted more than anything else. She didn't want to marry a man who would never love her and was probably secretly pining away for Elizabeth. She had her pride, after all.

Did Richard love Elizabeth as she loved him, or had she simply been a distraction? Richard appeared remorseful about hurting Elizabeth, but Sophia had not detected any pain at losing someone he loved.

"I think it would take a miracle for that to happen," said Richard. "I have looked for a way out, but I do not see one. If you do, please do not hesitate to inform me."

"With pleasure," Sophia promised. "Why don't we return to our mothers? They must be wondering what we're up to. We have been gone for some time."

Richard had taken her all over the house, and they had spent time arguing about their predicament. Sophia hoped they did not assume the worst.

"I agree, but I have one last request."

"We have already agreed to be friendly towards each other," she reminded him. "What more can you possibly want?"

"I'd like you to call me Richard. Don't you think it odd that we're all using our first names, yet you refuse to informally address me? We're an engaged couple, Sophia. We may not like each other, but we need to try to live with each other."

Richard's request wasn't outlandish, but he didn't understand why she insisted on addressing him formally. Calling someone by their name removed barriers and made people more familiar with each other. Sophia didn't want to become so familiar with Richard that she would forget that they were never meant to be. She didn't want to grow attached, knowing that he could never love her. However, it did seem odd to refer to him as 'my lord' when they had just agreed to be

friendly towards each other.

“Very well, I'll use your first name. I might forget here and there, but I'll make it a point of using it. Satisfied?”

Richard grinned, showing his dimple. “Very. May I escort you back to the parlour? I noticed you did not eat any of the pastries and barely touched your sandwich. Perhaps our arguing and the tour of the house has worked up an appetite.”

Sophia thought about it and found that she was hungry. "A fresh cup of tea and a few pastries would do me well."

“Good. Mother always feels bad when her guests do not eat what has been set out before them. Shall we?”

Richard held out his arm, and this time, Sophia didn't hesitate to take it. She still felt an odd sensation beneath her palms, but she figured that was residue from her earlier discomfort.

Their mothers turned to them as soon as they walked into the room, their faces shining with guilt. What had they been conspiring about?

“Back from your walk?” the Duchess said unnecessarily. “You appear to have enjoyed it. You both have grins on your faces.”

“I enjoyed taking a tour around your home, Your Grace,” Sophia answered. She didn't trust Richard to speak. “Richard gave me a lot of

information to digest.”

"He is a wonderful speaker, isn't he?" the woman claimed. "Come, take a seat. We have just ordered a fresh pot of tea, and there is still more than enough pastries to eat through. I might have asked for too much."

"Your hospitality is excellent, Diana," Sophia's mother complimented. "I could not have organised a better spread. Your chefs must be wonderful."

"They are," the Duchess agreed. "You just let me know when you need them to come to your house and prepare dinner for you, and I'll send them."

Sophia didn't see why her mother would agree to that when they had their own capable cook. Unless her mother was thinking about hosting a dinner party? Sophia wouldn't put it past her.

The woman was keen to show her own hospitality and hosting skills to the Hathertons and would likely do everything in her power to make the night a spectacular one.

Sophia inwardly groaned at just the thought of all the preparations that would take place. The older Emley woman would also insist on Sophia getting a new dress or taking one from Elizabeth's wardrobe. That would earn Sophia her sister's undying hatred; Elizabeth was finicky about her clothes and only allowed three people to handle her laundry.

If their mother took a dress from her and gave it to Sophia, a silent war might break out. Sophia didn't want to deal with any more of those.

"I'll certainly consider that," Sophia's mother said thoughtfully.

Oh no. Her mother was most certainly thinking about hosting a social event soon. What would Elizabeth say?

Perhaps I can talk her out of it. Mama and Papa do not know that Elizabeth might have been in my shoes right now if not for a ridiculous mix up in the dark. They have hardly noticed the tension between us because they are caught up in wedding arrangements and becoming linked to the Hathertons through me.

It was a formidable thing to know that one may be part of such a prestigious family, however Sophia would always live her life knowing that people hated her for marrying Richard. That wasn't a life she wanted to live.

Chapter 10

Well, the afternoon did not go as Richard had planned, did it? It had been turned on its head so entirely that he found himself feeling embarrassed enough to apologise to Sophia.

“Why am I even surprised anymore?” he muttered to himself.

Nothing seemed to go as planned whenever Sophia was involved; in fact, Richard should now do things while expecting the complete opposite to happen. That way, he wouldn't have to feel the embarrassment of yet another failed plan. One would think he would have learned his lesson after getting himself engaged to Sophia, but Richard obviously hadn't. He was treating Sophia like a typical woman, and she was anything but that. What now?

Richard shifted in his bed, throwing one leg out of the covers. He had been awake since three in the morning and still couldn't sleep. Judging from the brightness outside, it was likely seven o'clock or thereabouts. Fortunately, he had passed the years when he would need to be woken up by a servant to join his parents for breakfast. Now, Richard ate when he wanted to and got up when he wanted to.

He used to believe that he would take advantage of his freedom, but Richard still found himself waking up at his usual time or heading down to breakfast at the same time every day. Today, however, was not one of those days.

Leaning on his elbow, Richard stretched for his pocket watch. Quarter to seven. He hadn't been far off. Flopping back on his bed, he pushed his hair away from his brow and took both legs out of the covers. The

early mornings were always colder, but the day warmed up soon enough and usually left Richard wishing for cooler days. He appreciated spring and summer, but he would probably opt for winter if he had to choose a season.

“What to do, what to do,” he mumbled, tapping fingers on the bed.

He couldn't lay in bed all day, no matter how much he believed he wanted to—but leaving his bed would mean hearing about his upcoming wedding to Sophia. Richard wanted to avoid those conversations and pretend that he hadn't made the biggest blunder of his life. He was getting married over one silly kiss, for goodness' sake! What sort of world did he live in?

Boredom eventually got the better of him and he found himself sliding out of bed and blindly searching for his slippers with bare feet. Where the devil were they? Richard looked down and found them on either side of his feet. Feeling a little dumb, he pushed his feet into them and grabbed a robe he had tossed on the back of a chair last night. He could either wash his face or stare at nothing by the window.

Richard was still standing in front of his window when a servant knocked. “Yes?” he called.

“I have a note for you, my lord,” the butler called.

“From who?”

“I have not opened it, my lord, but I recognise the stationery as Mr Torrey's.”

“All right then. Come in and leave it on my nightstand.”

Cavendish noiselessly opened the door, a skill Richard had yet to master, and placed Nicholas's note by the bed.

“Would you have my breakfast brought to my room, Cavendish?” Richard asked. “I think I might like to have a little 'me time'.”

Richard used his fingers to quote 'me time', bringing a smile to the butler's face.

“Certainly, my lord. I'll have Mrs Cavendish bring it to your room. Would you like some hot water brought up as well?”

“After breakfast, and preferably with the day's news. I expect my father will be reading it now.”

“Yes, my lord. Will you be needing anything else?”

“My brains,” Richard said dryly.

“My lord?”

“Never mind, Cavendish. Go, speak with your wife about my breakfast. Oh, and send my parents a warm good morning. I apologise for not being with them this morning.”

“I’ll be sure to pass on the message, my lord,” the man said with a bow and left.

Richard took the letter from the nightstand, wondering what Nicholas had to tell him so early in the morning. A short scribble informed Richard of a game of cards to be played later at his house. The man requested his presence because he needed some moral support. That meant Philip and Marcus would be joining them. Did Richard really want to play cards today? Not at all, but he would go because Nicholas asked him to. That was what good friends were for.

“My charms might be put to better use on those dimwits,” he said aloud, tossing the note on the bed.

Sophia was immune to his charms and made Richard feel inadequate. He had been a young man of fifteen when those feelings of inadequacy had last plagued him.

Richard had fancied himself in love with a woman nearly twice his age and had tried to use his boyish charms on her, but she had laughed him off and gone off with a wealthy banker. He had taken the rejection in stride, but the moment had made him question his prowess over the fairer sex.

Breakfast was promptly delivered to him within twenty minutes of requesting it, complete with a fresh pot of strong coffee. It wasn’t his usual beverage, but after a brief dalliance with an American beauty, Richard had taken to drinking the bitter beverage with cream and

sugar, but only at breakfast and in his room. His parents were not keen on the pungency of the drink and complained that it put them off their meal.

Stabbing at a sausage with his fork, Richard took a large bite, squirting the juices onto the paper he was reading. He shook off the excess and continued to read, sighing when he saw his name alongside Sophia's in bold print. Someone had put them in the gossip section and had probably added a few details to make the story more enticing and full of scandal.

Richard didn't bother reading it, but threw the paper one side, downed his coffee, and called for his water. Perhaps a game of cards would take his mind off anything that had to do with Sophia.

It was amazing that he had hardly spoken to the woman before meeting her sister, and even then, their communication had been minimal. Richard had preferred keeping away from the woman, not wanting anyone to associate him with her.

Shame filled him at how he had treated her as an outcast. Yes, Richard had remained polite towards her, which was more than he could say for most people, but he had considered her a leper just as much as the next man. No one deserved that.

Now, seeing her and being alone with her had shown him a different side to Sophia. The woman certainly wasn't a pushover, but everyone already knew that—what they didn't realise was her devotion and love for her family, and her courage to stand her ground despite those who came against her.

Richard hadn't realised how badly people were treating Sophia until

he had heard the pain in her voice. There had been anger and determination as well, but the pain had been glaringly obvious.

“Ugh!” he growled, slipping his leg into stockings. “I’ve had enough of the woman. She’s practically all I think about!”

Richard wasn’t any more attracted to her now than before, but he didn’t feel like running in the opposite direction whenever he saw her. That was a step up from how he had felt about her a few days ago.

* * *

Richard found himself staring at two idiots some hours later. Philip and Marcus never ceased to amaze him.

“You do understand that you cannot bet what you do not have?” he asked them. “Besides, I thought we agreed we wouldn’t place any more bets.”

“But that isn’t any fun,” Marcus complained.

"Neither is losing, and yet here you are," Richard retorted. "Why don't we have a normal game of cards, and whoever wins will have bragging rights? We're friends; we shouldn't be trying to win things from each other."

“Why are you complaining when you have enough money to keep half of England fed and warm?” Philip said with a hint of jealousy. “It

shouldn't be a hardship to put money on the table.”

Richard rolled his eyes and looked over at his friend. Nicholas had given up on the men some time ago and was simply watching the game. He didn't have the patience to deal with their love of bets.

“Didn't you explain anything to them?” Richard asked.

“Do not act as though we are not here,” Philip snapped.

“Should I remind you to watch your tongue?” Richard asked, his voice dipping. “There is no need to be nasty. It is not my fault that you keep losing—it's yours. You need to learn when to stop, Philip. The same goes for you, Marcus.”

“We know our limits,” Marcus insisted.

Did they? Richard could have argued with them and won the argument using many examples, but he didn't want the trouble. Instead, he placed his cards on the table.

“In that case, I'm out. Play amongst yourselves.”

Philip's eyes flashed, but the man was like a chameleon. Already, the anger in his eyes had given way to friendliness.

"You're such a bore, Richard," the man said good-naturedly. "Nicholas promised that we would make a day of it, but you have both folded out of the game, and it's not gone past three yet. Why don't you reconsider? Marcus and I will not bet anything big and valuable. Perhaps we can place a bet of information?"

Richard had never heard of such a thing. He looked over at Nicholas, eyebrows raised in question. Nicholas shrugged, gesturing with his chin to ask Philip what he meant.

"What does betting for information entail?" Richard inquired.

"You have to offer up meaningful information if we win, and we'll do the same. Won't we, Marcus?"

"Yes," the man nodded. "No money is involved, just information."

That didn't sound too bad. "Very well. Deal the cards. Nicholas, are you in?"

Nicholas answered by coming closer. "None of you had better cheat me. I'm not as forgiving as Richard."

Marcus and Philip raised their hands and solemnly swore not to lie. Richard still didn't trust them, but what harm could they do? They just wanted information.

It didn't take long before Nicholas and Richard looked at each other

and wondered if Marcus and Philip were cheating. The pair had won several games and asked questions of a peculiar nature. Richard had not minded answering the questions until they started on his relationship with Sophia.

“How did you become so good at playing?” Nicholas asked them.

The men shrugged and grinned. “Practice makes perfect,” Marcus replied. “Now, don't deter us from asking the questions we want to know about. When did you last see Sophia, Richard?”

“A few days ago. Why?”

“Has the Ice Queen finally thawed her heart enough to make it beat just for you?”

Richard frowned at them. “Do you even know what you're saying? I certainly don't! Why don't we get back to the game, gentlemen? Enough with the silly questions.”

Richard waited for the next player to show a card, but no one did. He realised Philip had to play next, but the man was keeping his cards close to his chest both figuratively and literally.

“Come on, Philip, play already.”

“I believe Marcus did not get an answer,” the man said. “We cannot continue until he gets what he wants.”

Why was he friends with these men? How did he and Nicholas come to befriend them? Richard didn't understand the circumstances that had brought these two men into their lives, but he was sorely regretting it.

"Fine! You want your answer, and you will get it. Sophia has never been an ice queen and will never be an ice queen. She comes off that way to protect herself against people like us who judge her before getting to know her. And before you ask, no, I am not suddenly attracted to her. We have simply reached an understanding considering our predicament."

Richard hoped that was answer enough. He had come here to get away from thinking about Sophia, but it seemed Marcus and Philip were intent upon finding out details about her. Why? They had formed an opinion of her some time ago—there was no need to bring everything back up again.

"I somehow find that hard to believe," Philip said with a snicker. "Why not admit that you are disgusted at the thought of marrying our very own leper, and we'll cease to ask any more questions."

Richard might have admitted to that some time ago without giving it much thought, but he would be a fool to do it now, knowing what he knew about Sophia. It would be unfair of him.

"I'm not disgusted, and that's the truth," Richard claimed. "She is a person like you and me and not some leper or social pariah. Being different does not make you any less important than the next person."

Marcus started clapping. “Bravo, Lord Brittingham! Bravo! Such a speech should move even the coldest of hearts, but I did ask for sincerity. We all know that you cannot stand Sophia Emley, and you wish it was her sister in her stead.”

Richard would be lying if he didn't admit that he did wish he was marrying Elizabeth instead, but that didn't take away from his newly found respect for Sophia.

“You all know that I like Elizabeth—that hasn't changed. If it was up to me, I would marry Elizabeth instead, but that's not possible, is it? I prefer not to dwell on such things. Sophia and I have agreed to become friends rather than remain awkward strangers. We're getting married, for goodness' sake! Did you expect me to continue to dislike the woman?”

“Actually, yes,” Philip replied. “She has stolen your freedom and the right to marry whomever you choose. Aren't you angry about that?”

How would they react to finding out that it was all his fault? Richard had a choice. He needed to either put the rumours to bed and admit the truth, or allow Sophia to take the blame for everything. He went with his conscience.

“I'm the one who mistakenly kissed Sophia that night,” he said. “It wasn't Sophia's fault. None of it was. Elizabeth was supposed to meet me, but Sophia was the one who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She wanted to find somewhere to read and had brought her book and a lamp with her.”

Richard could still recall the book cover. It had been a rich green

colour etched with gold along the spine and lettering. He couldn't remember the title of the book, but he knew it was something gothic.

“Sophia was terrified when she saw a large shadow approach her,” he continued. “She didn't know it was me until I had kissed her.”

Richard had been the one to pull away first, but Sophia had run away, leaving her lamp and book behind. He had taken them back to the house and given them to a servant to return to the library. Richard had left soon after, not wanting to see her again. Little did he know that his blunder would give him a wife.

“I don't believe it,” cried Philip. “The woman has done something to you, hasn't she? Why didn't I see it before?”

“Did what?” Nicholas asked, confused. “Richard just told you the truth. What are you on about now?”

Philip looked at Marcus, and some unspoken form of communication must have passed between the two men because they nodded, put their cards down, and folded their arms.

“The rumours are true,” Marcus claimed.

“What rumours?” Richard asked.

“The gypsy rumours!” Philip exclaimed. “Sophia consulted a gypsy woman and somehow fed you with a potion. The kiss must have been

the final step of the spell.”

Richard shook his head in wonder. The men had gone completely mad! Nicholas evidently felt the same way because his face was filled with amazement.

“Have you both lost your minds?” Richard asked.

“We could ask you the same thing,” Philip returned. “But I'm afraid you wouldn't be able to tell. Did you happen to kiss Sophia again? They always say that the second kiss seals your fate. If you haven't, we still might have a way to save you. When is the next full moon, Marcus?”

Marcus did a quick calculation in his head. “I think in six days, but I'll have to consult my charts.”

Philip nodded. “So, we have six days before the spell is set in stone. I know a woman who deals with such incantations, Richard. I can make an appointment and—”

“Stop!” Richard raised his palm to them. “Just stop. I've heard more than enough.”

“But Richard—”

“But nothing, Marcus. What is wrong with you? I just told you what happened between Sophia and me, and yet you still insist on accusing

her of witchcraft or whatever it is. Were you not listening to me? I am the one to blame, not her!"

"But that's what she wants you to think," Philip insisted. "Can't you see how ridiculous this is? How can a man like you ever associate yourself with a woman like that? She's ugly! And let's not start on how awkward she is. Don't you see what is happening here?"

The sad thing about this was not what they were saying about Sophia—although Richard was angry enough about that; it was the fact that the men actually believed in such things. Richard wasn't one to pay much attention to the supernatural and preferred science to things he couldn't see, touch or feel. Even if casting spells was an real phenomenon, Sophia was too pragmatic to dabble in such things.

"I'm afraid you do not see what is happening here," Richard said, his voice strangely calm. "How dare you speak about my fiancée in that manner? How dare you accuse her of such things? I know that she is unattractive, and I already told you that I still prefer Elizabeth. Sophia knows this as well. We both don't want to marry each other, but we have no other choice. What is so wrong with reaching common ground with a woman I shall marry in a matter of months?"

"It's unnatural!" Marcus piped in.

Unnatural? Could these men hear their words? And they called Sophia disgusting! No wonder she came across so cold-hearted. The poor woman had been fighting and defending herself for so long that she had to build a shield of biting retorts to protect herself.

A wave of regret crashed through Richard, nearly suffocating him. The wave was followed by a feeling of protection for the young woman,

one that Richard had never experienced for any other woman in his life.

"Oh, shut up, you blithering fool," Richard snapped. "I am sick of hearing your unfounded accusations. That goes for you as well, Philip. Sophia deserves more respect from everyone, and I would appreciate it if you would stop speaking unkindly about her. She is my future wife and will be the mother of my children. If you find that you cannot keep your comments to yourself, then I suggest you stay away from me, for I will not be to blame for how I react next time."

Marcus and Philip looked dumbfounded, their faces slack with shock. Richard was just as surprised, but he didn't regret anything. Nicholas was the only one who was smiling.

"You don't mind if I leave now, do you?" Richard asked his friend.

Nicholas shook his head, still grinning. "I think the game is over, don't you?"

Richard had a feeling the man meant more than just the card game, but he didn't remain to question him. He felt slightly mortified by his own outburst, but Richard convinced himself it was the right thing to do.

He took his time going home, but his mind was no clearer when he walked through the front door of the manor.

"Oh, there you are, dear!" his mother called, coming out of the parlour. "I have such wonderful news for you."

“Good, because I need it.”

Richard greeted his mother with a kiss on her cheek as she frowned at him, catching a waft of her jasmine perfume.

“Why?” she asked. “Did something happen with Nicholas?”

“No. Do not fret about it, Mother. Tell me the good news.”

Her eyes brightened again as she waved a pretty envelope at him. “Sophia's parents are hosting a dinner in your honour to formally announce the engagement. Isn't that wonderful?”

That was the worst news his mother could have given him. Going to Sophia's home meant that Richard would come face-to-face with Elizabeth for the first time since his betrothal to Sophia.

“Yes, Mother,” he said with a sinking heart. “That is wonderful.”

Chapter 11

Sophia's armoire was a triple wide wardrobe of bleached oak and intricate flower and vine carvings along the drawers and borders. She had inherited the French piece from her great-grandmother, who had once been rumoured to have had a great love affair with a Frenchman before marrying her husband.

It wasn't filled to the brim with dresses and other attire because Sophia simply didn't have that much to put in it. Elizabeth would have taken the armoire if she had found it beautiful, but fortunately she didn't, and Sophia was able to keep it.

She sat inside it now, hiding away from the world while others rushed about below her. Her legs were cramping slightly from her cross-legged position, but Sophia would take that over being part of the chaos happening downstairs.

"I'd gladly drink castor oil if I could get out of attending tonight," she said aloud, clapping a hand over her mouth when she remembered that she was supposed to be in hiding.

The day of the dinner party had arrived, and Sophia wasn't prepared for it. She had seen the guest list and had nearly suffered an anxiety attack at the sheer amount of people her mother had invited. It was enough to make anyone run for the hills, but hiding in the armoire would have to do for now.

"If only I had a lamp," she whispered. "I could do with a book."

Perhaps a book about escape artists or people with magical powers to manipulate time and the elements. Sophia could do with the ability to disappear at will or change the minds of people. Better yet, she could go back in time and change the course of her future. She imagined warning her past self not to go into the garden, but remain in the house, thus avoiding the scandal and everything else that had come with it.

A miserable chuckle escaped her lips as Sophia realised that wishing for something would do her absolutely no good. The only thing that she could be thankful for was her sister's change of heart.

That had been surprising and most welcome; Sophia had missed speaking with Elizabeth and sharing stories with her. Elizabeth had simply stopped being nasty and dismissive towards Sophia and now acted as though nothing had ever happened. Sophia hadn't questioned it—she was just relieved that her sister was no longer angry at her for something that wasn't her fault.

Trying to stretch her cramped leg, Sophia stilled when she heard her bedroom door creak open and soft footsteps enter her room. Had someone come looking for her? She was aware that she couldn't stay hidden in the armoire forever, but Sophia had at least another three hours before she needed to get ready. It did not even take her an hour to dress.

“Sophia?” Elizabeth called out. “Are you here?”

Should she come out? Sophia wasn't sure. She still wanted some time to herself, although she didn't feel any better than when she had first entered the wardrobe.

“Where is she?” she heard Elizabeth say. “I’ve looked everywhere for her.”

Sophia could hear the growing irritation in her sister's voice. Not wanting to annoy Elizabeth when they had just started speaking to each other again, Sophia pushed open the door and climbed out, startling the younger woman.

“Oh my!” Elizabeth exclaimed. “You were in there the whole time?”

“Not quite the whole time,” Sophia admitted. “But long enough. Is there something you needed?”

“I’ve come to help you get ready for the dinner party, of course! I cannot trust you to do it yourself because you have no regard for putting in the effort to look presentable for such things. What dress have you chosen? I know that Mama recently had several made.”

Her sister wanted to help her dress for a dinner party that would celebrate her betrothal to the man she had believed herself in love with? Sophia didn't want to look a gift horse in the mouth, but surely she would be forgiven her mild scepticism?

“Mama insists that I wear the white dress with the blue and gold lace,” Sophia told her. “I have no opinion on the matter.”

“Well, you should!” Elizabeth declared. “This is your evening, Saffi. You cannot be upstaged by your guests, you know. I agree with Mama about the dress, but I’ll pick your accessories to go with it because I

cannot trust you to do so. I'll fix your hair as well."

"You don't have to do any of that, Lizzy," Sophia protested. "Why don't you spend this time getting ready? I know how you love to soak in a bath of milk and honey before any event."

"Do not concern yourself with me, my sweet sister. This is your night. Besides, you will marry into a wealthy and powerful family who expect you to fit into their world. Let me help you do that."

Sophia still wasn't sure about having her sister help her, but she was certainly happy to spend time with her.

"Very well—if it will not cut into your time."

"Not at all," Elizabeth chirped. "I've already sent for hot water for a lovely milk bath. If it was good enough for Cleopatra, then it is good enough for us."

Sophia didn't fancy sitting in a tub of milk and flowers. "But that's not necessary, Lizzy. A regular bath will be acceptable."

"Absolutely not! I have already sent for everything, so you will simply have to deal with it. We can talk while you bathe."

Sure enough, maids came in hauling buckets of hot water and throwing it into a tub before adding milk, honey, rose oil and petals. Elizabeth had come across the beauty ritual in a book from Aunt

Caroline's library. The Viscountess had a vast library of books from all over the world, some in their original languages and others translated into English. The book had appealed to Elizabeth because it listed the beauty rituals of all the women in history considered unusually beautiful.

"Get in," the younger woman instructed. "We wouldn't want the water to grow cold."

Sophia went behind a screen decorated with dragons, oriental temples and bamboo. Her father had purchased it from a merchant who had returned from a long trip to the East and had some surplus items he wished to sell. Sophia had a feeling that the items may have been stolen, and the merchant wanted to get rid of them, but she had never voiced the opinion. She received her answer when the same man was persecuted for piracy and plundering the goods of other merchants.

Did having the screen make her just as guilty? Perhaps it was best not to think about that right now.

Sophia quickly removed her clothing and stepped from behind it, out wrapped in a sheet. She eyed the steaming bath. "Are you certain 'tis not too hot? I do not wish to get a headache."

She didn't do well in overly hot weather or hot water; the only thing she liked hot was her tea.

"It's perfect," Elizabeth assured. "Step in, and I'll massage your temples."

Sophia widened her eyes. She was getting a massage as well? Elizabeth was undoubtedly putting in much effort just to help her get ready. Why? Was this her way of apologising for how she had behaved towards Sophia?

I suppose I shouldn't refuse it if this is her way of holding out an olive leaf to me.

“That sounds lovely,” she said at last.

Setting the sheet aside, Sophia stepped into the water and lowered herself into the perfumed bath. The water did feel too hot for comfort, but she convinced herself that it would cool in a moment or two.

Elizabeth knelt behind her and ordered her to lean back, arranging the few tendrils of hair that had escaped from their confinement atop Sophia's head to lie outside the bath.

“Close your eyes now,” the woman said. “I'm using Mama's special lavender oil to massage your temples. It should calm you down.”

Sophia was willing to try anything that would calm her down, so she did as ordered and closed her eyes, flinching slightly when her sister's cold hands touched her skin.

“The evening promises to be a grand one,” Elizabeth said, her voice gentle. “Mama and Papa are sparing no expense.”

“I wish they wouldn't. A simple dinner party like the one thrown by the Duke and Duchess would have sufficed.”

“Oh, but you're marrying an earl, Saffi,” Elizabeth protested. “We cannot afford to embarrass ourselves by throwing a party that is not worth their time. Surely, you understand that?”

“I suppose so,” Sophia replied, although she really didn't.

She didn't believe in fussing around to please people simply because they had more money or status, but she was aware that most people believed the same thing Elizabeth did.

“There will be lots of people tonight,” said Elizabeth. “I'm quite excited.”

“I'm happy you are, because I am not. I'll be forced to socialise with people who waste no opportunity to judge me.”

“You're marrying Richard now, so I doubt anyone will say anything mean to you.”

Elizabeth was naïve if she believed that. Most of the guests thought that Sophia had trapped Richard into marrying her, and others who knew them well, claimed that Sophia was so jealous of Elizabeth that she had to steal Richard away. Of course, neither of those rumours were true, but that didn't seem to matter.

At least I have Elizabeth back to her old self. She must not believe the rumours, or she wouldn't be here right now helping me get ready.

Sophia agreed to a ten-minute soak and no more despite Elizabeth's protests. She wasn't one to sit in water until her toes and fingers became wrinkled and her brain muddled by the fumes of the rose oil.

Stepping out of the bath, Elizabeth helped wrap her in a bath sheet, but Sophia drew the line at having her sister help apply body cream. That was just too... invasive. Was that the word? Sophia did allow Elizabeth to help her with her undergarments before sitting in front of the mirror and letting allowing her do her hair. Elizabeth also help her with Sophia's dress and accessories.

"There!" her sister cried, stepping back to look at Sophia. "You're all done, Saffi. I suggest you sit in this room until it's time to go, so you don't ruin all my hard work. I'm going to get myself ready now."

Elizabeth all but skipped out of the room, leaving Sophia to stare at herself in the mirror. The younger woman had not put up all of Sophia's hair at her insistence, but tucked it in a pretty plait that sat low. It wasn't the style of the day, but Sophia felt it suited her. She was also glowing from her bath and looked vibrant, and perhaps a little pretty, or as pretty as a socially unappealing woman could be.

She had never put this much effort into her appearance before, but she was pleased with the result. Perhaps there was something to all the beauty rituals Elizabeth swore by.

"I do smell like I bathed in a copious amount of flowers," she said, wrinkling her nose. "I'm not certain if I like the strong smell."

Before long, Sophia was called down to start receiving their guests. She felt rather faint walking down the stairs, but the risk of embarrassing herself kept her steady and upright until even she questioned her lightheaded state.

“You look lovely, dear,” her mother exclaimed, looking at her with approval. “I’m glad you put in the effort today.”

Her father said something similar, which Sophia found strange because she was not used to compliments from her parents. It felt unnatural.

Guests began pouring into the house, but Elizabeth did not come down immediately. Was she still getting ready? It would be easier to have her sister by her side while she greeted guests. Everyone was looking at her peculiarly and whispering to each other as they watched her. Sophia tried not to fret about it, but she was losing the battle.

The room grew hushed quite suddenly as the guests turned to the drawing-room’s doorway. Elizabeth had arrived and stolen everyone’s attention, and no wonder. The woman wore a white dress very similar to Sophia’s dress, but it looked much better on her. From the way her sister held herself, Sophia could tell that Elizabeth was happy with everyone’s reaction. Sophia understood that her sister was naturally more beautiful, but it almost seemed as though she was competing with her by wearing that particular dress.

Elizabeth wouldn’t do that to me. It must be a coincidence that her dress looks like mine.

The good thing about Elizabeth drawing all the attention away was that nobody was staring at Sophia now. Her sister's vivacity, beauty, and charm had captured her audience and held them spellbound.

Sophia gladly withdrew into the corner of the room where the light was dimmest. This might have been her evening, but she preferred to be inconspicuous.

Richard hadn't arrived yet, but that didn't alarm her. Sophia had noticed that the Earl was never on time for anything and always made a grand entrance. Much like Elizabeth had. She contemplated if that had been her sister's aim in coming down so late, but she pushed that thought away.

Elizabeth couldn't help being beautiful, and she had helped Sophia dress this evening, which could have cut into her own time getting ready for the party. There was always a reasonable explanation for everything.

Sophia stood on her toes some moments later, watching the doorway for Richard. Would he notice that she had put care into her appearance tonight? She felt a little anxious about seeing him, almost eager, which surprised her. Why would Richard's presence mean anything to her?

Despite this, she somehow knew that Richard had arrived before she saw him. It was as though the atmosphere of the room had changed, and it had nothing to do with the guests noticing him.

Sophia felt herself smile as she craned her neck and watched Richard's entrance, her heart quickly sinking when Elizabeth approached him and gained all his attention. His admiring gaze was free for all to see

and know that this was the woman he wanted.

Pulling further into the shadows, Sophia tried to make herself as small as possible. Hopefully, no one would see her, and they could just forget that Sophia Emley existed.

She wrapped her arms around her, biting her lower lip when it trembled. Where was Rose when she needed her? The woman was supposed to be here already! Sophia needed someone to stand by her and give her some support to last the evening or she wouldn't survive. It was only a matter of time before attention was returned to her and people remembered why they were here.

Glancing at Richard and her sister, Sophia had to admit that they were a lovely couple. Elizabeth looked perfect by his side and would have made a wonderful countess. What did the Duke and Duchess think about the situation? Would they have preferred to have their son marry Elizabeth?

“Of course,” said Sophia, answering her own question. “Everyone loves Elizabeth. Even I love her. Why wouldn't anyone else?”

Elizabeth was a sweet young woman who knew how to charm anyone, even the nastiest of people. That was simply her gift. Sophia wasn't jealous in the slightest but rather wished she had some of her sister's charm so she could handle social situations better.

Richard had moved further into the room when Sophia's eyes searched for him again, but he was no longer staring at Elizabeth with open adoration. He had a friend beside him that Sophia recognised, but she couldn't recall his name. The man was also handsome and probably had his fair share of admirers, but Richard certainly stole most of the

attention. He was like Elizabeth in that regard.

Was the friend jealous? Sophia looked more closely at him, noting his bored expression.

“He doesn't seem jealous,” she said to herself. “Merely unbothered by the woman standing around them.”

How odd. There were enough beautiful women to capture his interest. Did he, like Richard, prefer Elizabeth? That would certainly be awkward, but it would explain why he was only talking to the lovebirds. Sophia decided she didn't know who was more pathetic: the friend or herself?

Feeling a tad parched, she made her way to the refreshment table and selected the champagne her mother had decided to use instead of storing it for Elizabeth's betrothal. Mrs Emley had Sophia and Elizabeth's father purchase the champagne because she had been confident that Elizabeth would receive an offer of marriage before the end of the Season. No one had anticipated Sophia getting married first—it had been unheard of up until a few weeks ago.

Two women came up to the table, not noticing that Sophia was there. That was fine with her. She thought to move away before they realised that she was standing beside them, but the women's conversation caught Sophia's attention and kept her rooted to the floor.

“Elizabeth looks beautiful this evening,” the mousy-haired woman commented. “Not that she does not look lovely every day, but she seems... I don't know if I can put it into words. Ethereal, maybe.”

"I believe she is making a point," the raven-haired woman stated. "Just think about it, Sarah. This is supposed to be her sister's betrothal party, a party that would have been hers if Sophia hadn't concocted a plan to steal the Earl away. I've always said that the woman is devious."

"But Elizabeth is Sophia's sister," Sarah reasoned. "She has always seemed protective of Elizabeth. There has to be more to this situation than meets the eye."

Sophia felt grateful towards the woman for not believing everything she heard without questioning it first. If more people were like her, there wouldn't be so much scandal.

"You're too naïve," the other woman insisted. "Sophia was just bidding her time. Don't you know how intelligent she is? They would have burned her for being a witch once upon a time. She knows things she shouldn't as a woman."

Sophia pulled her face, briefly glancing at the raven-haired woman. What on earth was she talking about? What did she know that would have had her burned as a witch?

"That's a little harsh, Henrietta," said Sarah. "You know that I don't believe in that sort of thing. Reverend Monroe would scold you for such words."

Henrietta snorted. "That old man is just as backwards as most of the people in this country. Don't you know anything? I heard from a reliable source that Sophia consulted with a gypsy woman and was

given a love potion to bewitch the Earl. How else could he stand the thought of marrying her?"

Sophia wondered if she should laugh or cry. When did this particular rumour start making its rounds? It was simply ridiculous!

"A gypsy?" breathed Sarah, her voice filled with awe and a touch of terror. "Do you really think she would do such a thing?"

"You need only look at her to know that Richard could never willingly kiss her," Henrietta insisted. "I wonder if she thought a kiss could make her more beautiful like in that book I found my sister reading the other day? She told me about this frog prince who needed the kiss of a princess to break the spell and turn him back into a handsome prince. Perhaps Sophia thought that would work for her. I wouldn't put anything past her."

The women eventually walked off, still discussing how Sophia could be a witch in disguise. Was that even normal? What was this craze sweeping the ton? It was one thing to enjoy reading the supernatural but quite another to accuse an innocent person of partaking in nefarious activities.

Shaking her head, Sophia looked down at her glass and found it empty. When had she finished it? Frowning, she set aside the empty glass and took another glass of champagne, returning to her hiding place. The bubbly drink had somewhat calmed her down and taken the edge of disappointment, hurt, and shame off her.

"No wonder people enjoy consuming this," she murmured, staring at the rising bubbles.

She took a sip, wrinkling her nose at the bubbles popping on her upper lip. It felt like a wet feather being brushed against her nose and lips and wasn't unpleasant at all.

Deciding that she couldn't stand all night, Sophia looked for somewhere to sit but found no chair. She placed her glass on the nearest table, and took hold of the nearest chair, dragging it to her little section.

The noise drew several gazes her way, but she strangely didn't mind. Sophia smiled at them instead, baring her teeth. Her audience looked away quickly as though she had done something wrong. Did they not like her smile? Perhaps baring her teeth had reminded them of a menacing dog.

She giggled at the thought, coming to an abrupt halt when she realised that she wasn't acting like her usual self. What on earth was wrong with her? She had been fine until...the champagne! It was addling her brain and making her act and think strangely. Sophia decided to stop drinking the beverage straight away lest she did something to further embarrass herself.

Although, that might help me get out of this marriage. Richard's parents could find me unsuitable and refuse a match between us.

But that would also distress her family, and Sophia didn't want to do that. That brought about a heavy sigh that she could feel all the way to her soul.

Sophia ignored her chair and remained standing, not wanting the

alcohol to congregate in her belly from sitting down. Instead, she needed it to go all the way to her feet and out through her fingers.

It took a few minutes for Sophia to start thinking like herself again and she vowed to never drink champagne again.

She returned to watching the guests, her eyes falling on her and Richard's parents talking to each other. Had they not noticed that she was not an active part of the dinner party?

Richard was currently talking to a woman who was not his fiancée after all, yet no one thought it strange that he hadn't bothered to ask where she was. It said a lot about what people thought about her.

Sophia knew that everyone felt sorry for Richard and believed he was better suited to marry Elizabeth, but she felt hurt by everyone's attitude. The fact remained that Sophia was going to marry Richard in just a few months, and not Elizabeth. Didn't anyone care?

A couple broke away from the crowd and moved towards her, catching Sophia's attention. She thought that they were coming straight to her, but they never locked eyes with her. They were too engrossed in their conversation to notice that she was right there.

"Do you think Sophia ran off?" the woman asked.

"I don't see her anymore, but I wouldn't blame her if she did," the man answered. "Having people compare you to your sister cannot be easy."

“Do you feel sorry for her?” the woman asked, her tone mildly accusing.

“No, but it's human nature to feel sorry for pitiful creatures. Watching Elizabeth walk in wearing a dress similar to her sister's must have been a knife in the back. I know how you women are about fashion and hate to see anyone wearing the same thing at an event.”

“I would curl up into a ball and wish for death,” the woman claimed.

Sophia would have done the exact same thing if not for her common sense. Curling up into a ball in front of everyone was just asking for trouble.

The couple moved away, never knowing that Sophia had merely been a few steps away. She had wanted invisibility, but she was getting more than she had bargained for. Everyone had forgotten that she was in the room, but they certainly had not stopped talking about her. Sophia was their villain while Elizabeth and Richard were looked upon as an ill-fated pair who were cruelly torn apart by an evil witch.

Would Sophia always live under Elizabeth's shadow?

Chapter 12

“You're not to leave my side for one second,” Richard told his best friend. “I have no clue what I'm about to walk into.”

Richard stood outside the Emley home, unable to go inside just yet. He wasn't prepared to see Elizabeth and witness whatever his engagement to Sophia had caused. Perhaps he was a coward—so be it. Anyone in his shoes would be just as resistant to what lay ahead.

“I've already promised that I will, but you still have to go in,” said Nicholas. “It's inevitable.”

“That is terribly easy for you to say. You have never experienced a situation like this.”

“Indeed, I haven't,” Nicholas agreed. “I would not have put myself in a position to land in this situation. I have already been burned by love once and will not travel down that road again.”

Richard knew that his friend meant what he had said. Some time had passed since his heartbreak, yet the man had never looked at another woman with much interest again. Perhaps he engaged in mild flirtation if the woman was not a high-risk case, but it wasn't often.

Nicholas was good at sorting through the women who expected the flirtation to progress and those who expected nothing but a little male attention to while away the time.

Richard felt it was unnatural to never wish to be with a woman again, but who was he to judge? It wasn't Nicholas in a tight predicament this time.

"If I ever get out of this situation, force me to take your advice," Richard told him. "Although I think it's pretty certain that I will be married come autumn."

Unless a miracle happened. Oddly, Richard didn't feel as against the marriage as he initially had been and put it down to resignation. It could also be that he understood his fiancée a little better, but Richard would rather not get married if he could help it.

"If such an improbable thing were to happen, I would personally drag you away from any risky situations," Nicholas promised with a grin. "But you should rather learn to live knowing that Sophia will become your wife. It's easier that way."

Easier for whom? Richard gave himself a little shake as if preparing to run, but he was working out the tension in his body. He wasn't good at smiling when incredibly tense, knowing that he resembled a lunatic at best.

"Let's go in," he finally said. "I cannot stand out here forever."

Nicholas clasped his shoulder, squeezing it. "You'll do just fine, Richard. I doubt Elizabeth will cause a scene, and if you feel that she might bring drama, simply avoid her. You're here as Sophia's fiancée. Elizabeth is your past."

Richard understood that, but putting words into action was not an easy matter. How was Sophia coping? She lived with her sister! Remembering that helped to put things into perspective for him. This was only one evening, but Sophia had been with her sister since the scandal was revealed and their betrothal announced.

Sophia had informed him that Elizabeth now hated her and blamed her for everything, which he found unfair. One would think a sister should know their own sibling well enough to deduce fact from fiction.

“You're wrong. Elizabeth may not be my fiancée, but she will be my sister-in-law. That makes her part of my future.”

Nicholas grimaced for him. “That is an angle I have not yet put much thought into. This is a rather messy situation, isn't it?”

“Are you only now figuring this out?”

“I think we should go inside before we talk you out of it,” Nicholas suggested. “Everyone must be wondering where you are. Your parents must have arrived by now and are likely looking for you.”

Richard looked at the front door and promptly lost his courage. “Give me another good reason to go inside.”

“You will embarrass Sophia by not standing by her side as her fiancée. She has faced enough backlash for your mistake.”

“I didn't ask you to make me feel like the foulest cretin to ever walk the earth,” Richard muttered.

Nicholas chuckled, pushing Richard towards the door. “I'm afraid I cannot think of an encouragement that will not poke at your guilt, so it's best you take a deep breath and walk through that door. Someone must have seen us standing here and is now wondering why we won't go inside.”

The man was right. Richard sighed but took a step forward, and another, until he reached the front door and was admitted by the Emley's butler. He and Nicholas were led to the drawing-room where he came to an abrupt stop at the sight of a woman that seemed too beautiful to be real. Elizabeth Emley was undoubtedly a stunning woman, but tonight she looked...Richard had no words to describe her.

He felt like an idiot as he stood there and watched the woman walk towards him, or did she float? Elizabeth's movements were so graceful that Richard wondered if her feet were touching the ground.

“How lovely to see you, Richard!” she exclaimed. “And you as well, Nicholas,” she added, paying the man a cursory glance.

“*Enchanté, mademoiselle,*” Nicholas greeted.

Richard frowned at his friend. Why was he trying to be charming towards Elizabeth? Friends did not infringe on another man's property. Fortunately, Elizabeth didn't seem the least bit bothered by

Nicholas and only seemed focused on him. It made Richard feel good.

“How are you?” Richard asked.

“Oh, I've been well,” the woman said, her smile dropping just a little. “I'm getting by considering what has happened, but I am not angry at all. Why don't we circle the room? Everyone has been waiting for you to arrive.”

What did she mean by what had happened? Was she angry at him? Richard didn't get to ask as he was led towards a group of people, but the questions remained in his mind. There was something that he wasn't remembering, something important.

“It's about time!” a man exclaimed, shaking Richard's hand. “We wondered if you had developed cold feet and decided to stay away. No one would have blamed you.”

Richard mulled over the man's comment as Elizabeth took over the conversation, inwardly groaning when he realised his foolishness. How had he allowed himself to forget why he was here? He had let his admiration for Elizabeth to cloud his mind and make him temporarily forget the gravity of his problem.

I didn't expect Elizabeth to be so welcoming nor so lovely. Perhaps it's because I have not seen her in some time and forgot how beautiful she is.

It seemed foolish to forget that he was currently speaking with the sister of the woman he was soon to marry despite being interested in Elizabeth and not Sophia, but he had.

Somewhat embarrassed, Richard wondered where Sophia was, but he didn't want to ask Elizabeth; he didn't know if the woman was still angry with her sister and didn't want to upset her.

"It has been a while since we were all together," he heard Elizabeth say. "We should plan an outing soon. Why don't we go horse-riding again?"

The women and men around him agreed and began discussing who would be part of the riding party and when they should do it. Not one of them mentioned Sophia or included her in their plans. That made him uncomfortable and annoyed. Were they dismissing her?

Shaking his head, he looked around the room, not understanding why Sophia hadn't appeared yet. It didn't seem right that he hadn't seen her despite being in her house for several minutes.

Richard finally spotted her in a dark corner with half her body in the shadows, but the half he could see squeezed his heart. Sophia looked forlorn and dejected. This night was supposed to be about them, but everyone acted as though he was marrying Elizabeth! This was wrong, very wrong.

Shame filled him, ripping through his conscience. He had failed to think about Sophia the moment Elizabeth had appeared and taken his breath away. Elizabeth's beauty had so captivated him, it made him forget that he was here for Sophia, and not to revive whatever he had had with Elizabeth. Did no one else see how wrong this was?

Richard looked over at his friend, noticing the man's displeased look. Nicholas wasn't enjoying himself and looked like he was ready to leave. Leaning towards him, Richard spoke into his ear.

"I'm going over to Sophia."

"It's about time," Nicholas replied, his tone tight with frustration. "Go, I'll deal with the others."

Richard walked away without further word, hearing the others ask where he was going. Nicholas answered them, silencing them with his words.

"He is going to Sophia. I think it's obvious that he should be by her side as she is his bride-to-be. Do you not agree?"

Richard smiled. Nicholas had the ability to shut down arguments or conversations with just a few words. It was a handy skill to have.

Making his way over to Sophia, Richard vowed to remain by her side for the remainder of the evening. None of this was her fault, despite what he had allowed people to initially believe, but she was bearing the brunt of people's anger and disgust over a scandal he had caused. The fact that she was alone right now and Elizabeth was surrounded by people spoke volumes to him and made Richard question how he had treated Sophia in the past.

I'm still not happy about this marriage, but I cannot allow Sophia to carry the weight of this scandal any longer. I need to do right by her.

He drew up to her, lightly touching her arm to gain her attention. Sophia started, her eyes growing wide as she turned to him.

“Oh, Richard!” she said, her lips curling into a smile. “I didn't see you approaching. I thought you were still with Elizabeth.”

Seeing Sophia's smile pleased Richard. It seemed she was happy to see him, but the moment didn't last. Her face suddenly shut down, closing him off to whatever she was thinking.

“I was, but now I'm here. How are you?”

“Well, thank you. Would you not prefer to be with them?”

Sophia used her eyes to point at the group of guests he had just left. They were pretending not to look his way, but Richard could tell they were curious. On the other hand, Elizabeth appeared upset, but she was still smiling.

“You're the woman I'll be marrying in a matter of months,” he said, turning back to Sophia. “I think it only right that I spend the evening with you. Do you wish to sit down?”

Richard noticed a chair beside her and a glass of champagne that looked hardly touched.

Sophia barely looked at him as she spoke but kept her gaze on the guests. "You may sit if you wish."

Richard had the feeling that she didn't want him talking to her, but he wasn't going to go anywhere.

"How has your day been?" he asked. "I imagine your house was a tad chaotic."

"Yes."

Undeterred by her lack of response, Richard soldiered on. "Your parents have invited many people. I take it that some of them are your friends? This is a dinner party to celebrate our engagement, after all."

Sophia gave him a brief glance that made him colour. Had he forgotten that she was treated like a social pariah? If Sophia had any friends amongst the guests, surely they would be by her side right now. Richard wondered if she had any friends at all.

Elizabeth might have been her only friend, and I've foolishly ruined the relationship between them. She must be all alone.

Richard felt a little sick to his stomach at the thought. No one deserved to be alone.

"My only true friend is Nicholas," he revealed, pointing at the man. "I believe a man only needs one good friend to get by in life."

Sophia nodded, saying nothing. Why did she have to be so distant and difficult? He was trying to make conversation with her, for heaven's sake.

When an announcement was made for the guests to make their way to the dining room for dinner, Richard quickly held his arm out to her.

“May I escort you?”

Sophia looked like she might say no, but she surprised him by lightly placing her hand on his forearm. Her gloved hand barely touched his sleeve, but at least it was there.

Their close proximity brought Richard's nose in contact with whatever scent Sophia was wearing. It didn't smell like her usual perfume, but it was still quite pleasant. For some reason, it reminded him of Elizabeth. Were they wearing the same scent?

I think I prefer Sophia's usual scent. This one is a tad cloying.

Richard and Sophia were soon seated next to each other towards the head of the table. Fortunately, Elizabeth was far enough that Richard didn't have to worry about making polite conversation with her. He didn't want to fuel any more stories that sensationalised the supposed love triangle he was in. What people didn't understand was that Sophia didn't love him and probably didn't like him. She was only putting up with him for her parents' sake. It was a sobering thought for a man accustomed to adoration from women.

Richard didn't venture to strike up a conversation with Sophia until the first course was served, giving her time to settle.

"I think I prefer this leek and potato soup over the chestnut soup served at my house," he commented. "Your cook certainly knows their way around soup."

"I'll pass on the compliment," said Sophia.

"Will the other courses be this good? If so, I didn't wear the right attire. This one will not give an inch to accommodate a night of feasting."

Richard nearly made a show of his satisfaction when Sophia gave him a ghost of a smile.

"Perhaps you should have worn a dress," she said and promptly filled her mouth with more soup.

"Do you think a dress would accentuate my fine physique?" he questioned.

Sophia gave a slight cough, dabbing the edges of her mouth with a napkin. Richard felt the cough suspiciously sounded like she was hiding a laugh, but he couldn't be sure.

“You might need some undergarments to adjust some areas, but I believe a dress would look marvellous on you,” Sophia replied, giving him a side glance.

Before she looked away, Richard caught the mirth in her eyes, giving him the confidence to keep talking.

“I rather like the dress you're wearing,” he told her. “But I must admit that it suits you better than it will ever suit me.”

“We could still exchange attire,” she suggested. “I'd much rather be in men's clothing than a dress. I imagine you have freedom of movement not afforded to women. As for these flimsy shoes...” Sophia looked to her side, showing her delicate foot. “Well, they are rather comfortable. I think I'd like to keep them.”

This was the most Sophia had ever said to him outside of her rants. Was she finally opening up?

They kept up their conversation about clothing and whether men or women were more fortunate in the fashion department until the next course was served. Richard heard Sophia groan when she looked at the platters of fish and vegetables in front of her.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I do not particularly like parsley sauce on my fish, and this one looks drowned in it.”

Richard looked down the table until he spotted a fish that looked untouched by the sauce. He took the saucy fish in front of her and stood up, surprising everyone at the table.

“Is something the matter, Richard?” Mrs Emley inquired.

“Not at all. Sophia and I prefer fish with less sauce; thus, I wish to exchange it for another one. Is that acceptable?”

“Of course,” his future mother-in-law said. “But you may ask a servant to do it for you. There is no need to get up.”

“I wish to do this for my fiancée,” Richard replied. “Please, everyone, continue with your meal. I apologise for interrupting you.”

Everyone insisted that it was no bother at all and even offered up the platters of fish near them. Richard selected the one with the least sauce and returned to his chair. He could tell that people were watching him and Sophia, but he ignored them.

“Is this better?” he asked her.

“You didn't have to do that,” Sophia said, looking confused. “Why go to all that trouble?”

“I believe that I answered that already. Would you like me to put some on your plate?”

Sophia's cheeks turned bright pink as she muttered no and served herself. To his amazement, she offered to help him put some on his plate, barely meeting his eyes as she did so.

"I'd love some fish, thank you," Richard said.

He tucked into his fish with great gusto as soon as she had plated it, marvelling at how different Sophia was when she wasn't yelling at him or ignoring him. Could this mean she was beginning to warm to him?

Dinner passed by rather quickly in Richard's opinion because he found he was enjoying himself. By the time dessert had come, he knew who Sophia's best friend was, her interests in the supernatural and mythology, and her ability to make him laugh. That had perhaps been the most surprising of all. Richard had wanted to charm Sophia, but he found that he was being charmed by her. Why did she not show this part of herself to others?

As he and Sophia returned to the drawing-room, he felt someone bump into him. Richard immediately put his arms out to steady the person and found that he was holding Elizabeth.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" the woman exclaimed. "I must have tripped on the carpet."

"Are you hurt?" Sophia asked, looking at her sister.

"No," Elizabeth replied, but she didn't bother looking at Sophia. Instead, she kept her eyes on Richard. "I'm not hurt at all. Richard managed to catch me, for which I am thankful. Let me not impose on your time for too long. I know you have much to discuss."

Richard was glad that Elizabeth had not caused a show and was willing to let them be, but he soon realised that the woman had a motive when he felt her push a piece of paper into his hand before walking away. He instantly knew it was a message.

"Why don't I get you something to drink?" he suggested to Sophia.

Sophia didn't answer him right away but searched his eyes for a moment before nodding her head.

"Yes, thank you. I just saw Rose, so I'll make my way to her. Join us when you return."

Richard promised to do so and hurried to where the refreshments were kept. He looked around him before opening the note in his hand, his heart thumping as he read the short message:

Meet me by the hedge behind the fountain.

Elizabeth wanted to see him! Should he go? Richard decided that he owed the woman this much, and after delivering a glass of wine to Sophia and her friend, Richard made the excuse of needing fresh air and took off. He felt guilty lying to Sophia, but he didn't want to hurt or disappoint Elizabeth any more than he already had.

Richard kept looking around him as he approached Elizabeth, taking a step back when she threw herself into his arms.

"I'm so glad you came!" she cried. "I just knew you wouldn't be able to stay away."

"I came because you asked me to," said Richard, setting her away from him and taking another step back. He was not looking for another scandal. "What did you wish to tell me?"

"I want you to know that I still love you dearly and do not blame you at all for what has happened. Sophia tricked you into believing that she was me and trapped you into this marriage."

Richard was taken aback by the woman's confession of love. She had never said it before, and neither had he. It didn't feel right.

"It was my fault, Elizabeth. I assure you that your sister is not to blame."

"She has done this horrible thing, and yet you try to defend her," the woman said. "You are an amazing man, Richard. You do not deserve to be shackled to my horrible sister. I was blind-sighted by my love for her, but I will not underestimate her again! She is now nothing to me but a hateful, spiteful woman whom I must live with and call sister for my parents' sake."

Richard couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sophia had said that her sister hated her, but hearing Elizabeth confirm Sophia's words truly made it apparent just how much the older Emley sister had to put up with.

"How will you cope marrying her?" Elizabeth asked. "We both know that we should have been together, but we've been cruelly torn apart by my scheming sister. I had no clue that she would do such a thing. Do you know that she warned me against you? Little did I know that she wanted you for herself."

Richard wanted to laugh at that point. Sophia despised him, and it was only today that he had seen a piece of herself that she had kept hidden from the world. He had a feeling that her best friend and Elizabeth were the only two people to have seen that side of Sophia, but now Elizabeth wanted to throw it away based on a lie.

"Sophia is your sister, Elizabeth," Richard reminded her. "You should not talk about her like that."

"I am only speaking the truth," the woman said with a pout. "How else should I react? You are due to marry my sister, Richard. Do you not realise how unfair this is for me? For us? You would have married me if not for my sister."

When had Richard ever said that to her? Yes, he would have preferred to marry Elizabeth, but the cards had been dealt and his fate sealed. The older Emley sister was going to become the Countess of Brittingham and the mother of his children. Nicholas was right when he had advised that Richard should accept his fate and make the most of it.

“Let us not dwell on the past,” he insisted. “I apologise for what has happened, but we must move on for our family's sake.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “This is not right, Richard. Is there not a way we can be together? You must know a way to end this betrothal and be with the woman you truly love. Sophia is destined to be a spinster, and I say good riddance.”

Richard found that he could no longer accept the nonsense Elizabeth was spewing.

“Stop speaking so unkindly about your sister!” he scolded, making sure to keep his voice down. “She has done nothing to earn your anger, and I resent that you have rejected her based on a lie. I was the one who kissed your sister, not the other way around. Sophia is innocent and not worthy of your accusations. Perhaps it's time to set aside your anger and reunite with your sister. Sophia loves you very much.”

Richard turned away then, unwilling to hear such horrible words used against an innocent woman. What did he have to do and say for people to understand that he had been the one who had kissed Sophia?

Richard returned to the party, hoping that his meeting with Elizabeth had not been seen by the other guests. He knew he hadn't been gone for too long and hoped people would assume he had just gone out to get a little fresh air.

I've just become engaged and already I'm keeping secrets from my fiancée.

Chapter 13

Elizabeth did not know how to be subtle. Sophia knew her sister was not clumsy; thus, the younger woman's little fall had spiked suspicion. Did Elizabeth want Sophia to know that she was up to something? If so, why?

Falling into Richard had been no accident, and the slipping of a note into his hand had been glaringly obvious. If Sophia could see that, it meant others could as well.

Sophia was tempted to watch Richard head to the refreshment table and witness him read the note Elizabeth had given him, but she didn't want to attract any attention by standing in the middle of nowhere.

With a heavy heart, Sophia approached her best friend, quickly rebuking the unwanted feeling. She was silly to feel disappointed. She noticed Rose watching her, the woman's smooth brow puckering into a slight frown.

"What is wrong?" Rose asked as soon as Sophia was close enough to hear.

"Nothing," Sophia lied. "When did you arrive?"

"I was late because Mama insisted on changing her dress for the evening. We arrived about fifteen minutes before everyone was called to the dining room."

Sophia had not noticed the Pilkingtons arrive and was surprised to know her friend had been nearby for some time. It had only been halfway through dinner that Sophia had seen her friend seated at the end of the table talking to Richard's friend, Nicholas.

"Why did you not come and see me?" Sophia questioned.

"I did not wish to disturb you. You were with Richard, and I felt you needed some private time with him. He is your fiancé, after all."

Richard was her fiancé in word, but not in deed. Talking about him reminded her to search for him, hoping to catch him in the act of reading the note. Instead, Sophia found Richard making his way to her with two drinks in hand.

"You're watching him as though something is about to happen," Rose whispered. "What is going on?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," Sophia whispered back as Richard drew nearer.

He looked agitated, but still managed a smile as he handed the glasses of wine to them.

"How are you, Rose?" he asked.

Sophia appreciated that he addressed her friend directly rather than be dismissive of her as most people often were. She had talked about Rose at length during dinner, and Richard had evidently understood the woman's importance in her life.

"Well, thank you. My gratitude for thinking of me," Rose replied, tilting her glass toward him.

"I chose wine instead of champagne," he said. "But I can return for champagne if you would prefer that."

"Wine is fine," Sophia assured him. "Where is yours?"

And what had he done with the note? Was it in his pocket? Sophia found that she desperately wanted to know what her sister had written to him.

Richard looked away for a moment, scratching the side of his head. "Oh, uh... I thought I might get some fresh air. I need a little time outside before we separate, and my father insists on playing cards."

That would not be for another hour or so. Coffee still had to be served with a few sweet treats for those who had the stomach for it after a large meal. It was apparent to Sophia that Richard was off to the garden to meet Elizabeth.

A little stabbing pain spread across her chest, but Sophia refused to let it show on her face. That would be pure foolishness on her part.

“It is a lovely night,” she told him, pleased that her voice showed no strain.

He nodded harder than necessary. “Yes, it is. I shall not take long,” he promised.

“Take however much time you wish.”

Richard took off, not seeing her crestfallen expression. He was so eager to go and see Elizabeth, and it saddened her. It shouldn't because Sophia knew where she stood with him, but it still did.

“Talk to me, Sophia,” said Rose. “What is the matter? What has happened?”

“What do you mean?”

Sophia noticed how distant her voice sounded, as though someone else was speaking, but that person was undoubtedly her.

“You look as though you have just been told that winter has been suspended for the year and summer will replace it.”

Sophia laughed, the noise sounding miserable in her own ears. Someone else listening to them might be confused because most people preferred the sunny summer months, but Sophia genuinely loved winter. It was a season of hot cocoa drinks, fragrant wood

burning in the fireplace, snow angels, cold-induced pink cheeks, and soft snowfall that blanketed the world in white. What was not to love about it?

“I think I would stay indoors until winter was returned,” said Sophia.

“Do not shy away from my question,” Rose chided. “You seemed animated at dinner and were getting along well with Richard. I noticed how people kept staring at you in puzzlement, but I was so happy. Now, I see you miserable. Why?”

Sophia had enjoyed dinner against her better judgement. She had been determined to only pay Richard the necessary attention to please their parents, but the man had broken down her resolve with just a few words and engaged her in conversation. It was the first time she had allowed herself to be comfortable around him, and look where that had gotten her.

“I suppose I have remembered that Richard's heart belongs to another, yet I am due to marry the man. Pathetic, isn't it?”

“Dinner showed me that there is hope for you,” Rose argued. “You were both at ease with each other and laughed an awful lot for a pair forced to get married. So why the morose opinion?”

“Richard is a charming man. It means nothing that he shared a few laughs with me.”

Rose shook her head. “No, you will not convince me otherwise. I know charm when I see it, and what he was showing was not charm.

It was comfort with a woman he gets along with. Now, tell me what is wrong before I march after Richard and demand that he tell me.”

Rose crossed her arms, her gaze determined as she stared Sophia down. Sophia knew that her friend would do just that, so she decided to reveal the truth of the matter.

“I believe Elizabeth gave Richard a note to meet her in the garden. He is not going outside for fresh air.”

Rose's mouth dropped open. “What? At your own engagement party? Has she no shame?”

“They like each other, Rose. Possibly even love each other. I cannot stop that.”

"What does that matter? If Richard had been serious about Elizabeth, he would have asked for her hand in marriage weeks ago, but he didn't. He could not have been too serious about her."

Sophia wanted to believe that was true, but it was wiser to maintain her initial belief.

“I am not going to argue about this,” she insisted. “What I know is that Richard has gone to meet with Elizabeth. That alone reveals how he feels about her.”

The fact that she was unhappy knowing this revealed to Sophia that

she was treading upon dangerous ground. She needed to pull away before she got hurt.

“Hogwash!” Rose hissed. “You need to go after Richard and confront them right now. He is your fiancé, and you deserve more respect than this from him. This is your engagement party, for heaven's sake! What business does your sister have interfering with two people betrothed to each other?”

Sophia considered her friend's advice, but quickly dismissed it. What if she followed them and found them locked in an embrace? Besides, the last thing Sophia wanted to do was cause a scene.

“No,” she said firmly. “Confronting them will bring this dinner crashing around our ears and cause further scandal. I have had enough of all the drama, Rose.”

In fact, Sophia felt tired to the very marrow in her bones. She no longer wanted

to deal with the situation and wished she could simply walk away and leave Richard and Elizabeth to their love. There was nothing more shameful and pitiful than being in such a situation. It was more than anyone should bear.

“Oh, Soph,” cried Rose, putting an arm around Sophia's waist and drawing her near. “I am so sorry about this mess. You don't deserve this.”

Sophia laid her head against that of her friend. “It's enough that you're

by my side. I do not know what I would do if I did not have you as my best friend. Perhaps I would have driven myself insane and retired into the forest to live with the animals.”

Rose laughed. “You would do that even if you were not insane. Oh, no,” the woman said, suddenly groaned and straightening her body.

“What is it?”

“My mother is coming this way. I can only imagine what she is going to say. She saw me speaking to Nicholas Torrey and now has it in her mind to marry me off to him. Is it too late to hide?”

Sophia watched the Frenchwoman approach them and nodded. “Much too late.”

“Sophie! *Comment tu vas?*” the woman greeted, kissing both cheeks.

“*Ça va bien, merci.* How are you, Madame Pilkington?”

“I’m well, my dear. My, but you look *très jolie* today. Who did your hair?”

When the woman chose to compliment Sophia and even call her ‘very pretty’, one had to assume that she was happy or excited about something. Sophia had a feeling it had to do with Nicholas.

“Elizabeth helped me get ready for the evening, but my mother chose the dress.”

“Ah, I see. I am surprised that your mother has made such a good choice for you, Sophie,” the Frenchwoman said. “She is not normally so careful.”

The woman was right, but this was a special occasion. “My mother has taken great care to make sure that I do not disappoint my soon-to-be in-laws.”

Sophia was not used to all the attention and would have preferred to going back into obscurity.

The Frenchwoman smiled. "I am delighted to hear that! Eh, forgive me if I am wrong, but I think I saw your sister wear a similar dress. That is not very, uh...good of her."

“They are similar,” Sophia agreed. “But I do not mind. Most of the women today are wearing white dresses.”

“*Oui*, but they are different to yours,” the Frenchwoman insisted. “Perhaps your sister wishes to compete?”

Sophia didn't know what to say to that. It wasn't something that she wished to think about or believe of her sister, but the younger woman's actions were damning.

“Sophia is the one who will be married, *Maman*,” Rose interrupted. “Thus, there is no competition at all.”

Madame Pilkington nodded, her yellow curls bouncing. “I suppose you are right, *ma petite*. Sophie has won the greatest prize of all, and perhaps you will be next, yes? Has Rose told you about her new beau?” the woman asked Sophia.

“*Maman!*” Rose cried. “Do not read into this. We sat next to each other and spoke a few words. That is it.”

“*Non*, I will not listen to that, *ma petite*,” the woman argued. “I saw with my own two eyes that there is some mutual interest. Why not make the best of it?”

“*S’il te plaît, Maman*,” Rose begged. “Do not do this.”

“*Quel est le problème, ma petite?*” Madame Pilkington asked with a frown. “I do this for you.”

"You will embarrass me in front of these people if you pursue Nicholas. I cannot handle any more of this, Mama. You have done enough."

Sophia grew surprised when she saw hurt flash in the Frenchwoman's eyes. Why was she so hurt?

“I try to make my daughter happy,” the woman said with a shrug. “But no matter what I do, it always seems wrong. *C'est la vie, non?* I know I am not a perfect mother, and I have made mistakes, but I will never stop wanting what is best for you, *ma petite*. Love me or hate me, but I am your mother.”

The Frenchwoman drew away from them, but not before Sophia noticed a sheen of tears in the woman's eyes. She had never seen Madame Pilkington so emotional! Usually, the woman pretended to cry to get her own way, but this was sincere.

“I have only seen my mother cry three times in my life, including this time,” Rose said, her voice thick with unshed tears. “She makes me so mad, but I do love her, Soph. I don't want to hurt her.”

Sophia hugged her friend, ignoring the curious eyes watching them.

Some time ago, a rumour had been started that claimed Sophia and Rose were lovers, but it had been dispelled soon after. Sophia couldn't understand why showing affection could be so misconstrued, but it didn't surprise her anymore.

“Give her some time to understand,” Sophia advised. “Let her be sad for a little bit, but she will come around. 'Tis better than being embarrassed and living with the shame for weeks to come.”

Sophia found that sadness was easier to overcome than embarrassment.

“I suppose you're right,” the woman agreed. “I'll bring her tea in bed

tomorrow and read her a romance story in French. She'll love that."

"That's the spirit. Work on the solution, not the problem."

Rose drew back, lifting her eyebrows. "When will you take your own advice?"

"When the first man lands on the moon."

"That's impossible. If man was meant to travel to the moon, surely God would have given us the ability?"

"When has that ever stopped mankind?" said Sophia. "Mark my words; they'll get a man on the moon eventually."

Rose looked dubious. "There is more chance of another plague than a moon adventure. You have some strange thoughts circling in your head, Soph. Next, you'll tell me that we will not use horses to pull our carriages in the future, or women will cease to wear dresses."

"Will they parade around naked?" Sophia teased. "That could cause problems."

Rose chuckled. "That would be a sight that I would not want to see, but I meant that they would wear men's attire instead."

“That would be a day to look forward. I like dresses well enough, but I sometimes find them cumbersome.”

Rose said nothing as she watched a few men, finally shaking her head. “I prefer dresses, and I know of at least two men who agree with me. They wish to go back to the days when men wore robes and could feel the air swirl around their legs.”

Sophia pulled her face, not appreciating the imagery her friend had conjured. “Do not say anything like that again. Besides, there are cultures where men wear robes. It's not taboo in other countries.”

Sophia and Rose continued to speak about random things, and for a few freeing moments, all thoughts of Richard and Elizabeth were put on hold. That, however, soon changed when Sophia happened to look towards the doors and saw Richard return. Her belly flipped painfully and dropped fast, startling her slightly. Rose noticed and followed her gaze, cursing under her breath when she saw Richard.

“And so the wayward fiancé returns,” the woman muttered, shaking her head.

Sophia looked away. “I do not think I wish to speak to him.”

“I do not think you have much choice because he is coming here. I do not see Elizabeth anywhere.”

“They cannot return at the same time and make it obvious that they were together,” said Sophia.

“Perhaps I can give him a talking to,” Rose threatened.

Sophia gripped her friend's hands, appalled at the very thought. “Don't you dare, Rose Pilkington. I will not speak to you for a month if you do that.”

Rose sighed. “Very well, but do not expect me to be kind towards him. He lost the right the moment he stepped outside those doors.”

They fell silent when Richard drew near, not wanting the man to overhear their conversation about him. He didn't look sheepish at all. Did he not see anything wrong with his actions?

Richard does seem bothered, which I find strange. Shouldn't he feel exhilarated after spending some time with Elizabeth?

“How was the fresh air?” Sophia asked.

“Not as refreshing as I hoped it would be,” he admitted. “Perhaps I prefer the indoors better, but I do enjoy a good ride outside. Do you ride?”

“Somewhat. Rose is a great rider.”

How was she managing to sound normal when she was anything but inside? Sophia wanted to know what he had discussed with Elizabeth

and if they had stolen an embrace.

“Is that so? What kind of horse do you have?” he asked Rose.

“A Thoroughbred, of course,” Rose answered coldly.

Sophia winced at the tone in her friend's horse. Rose was not about to pretend that she liked Richard, not after sneaking away to be with Elizabeth.

Richard appeared a little taken aback, but he continued to speak. “I have two Thoroughbreds for riding and other breeds for drawing my carriages and those that work on the estate. I try to ride as often as I can, especially when in the countryside.”

“How nice,” was Rose's response. “Are any of your horses ever unfaithful?”

Sophia had to admit that her friend's question made no sense, and apparently, Richard thought so as well.

“In what way?” he asked.

“In the ways that count.”

“The evening has progressed nicely, don't you think?” Sophia

interrupted. "Mama spent a significant amount of time organising everything. Do you think they will announce the coffee soon? Although Mama will likely serve tea as well, as not everyone fancies the taste."

"What is your opinion on faithfulness, Richard?" Rose asked, ignoring Sophia's pleading looks to leave the subject alone. "At what point do you consider yourself fully committed to a person?"

Rose was like a raging bull once she got started. Sophia had to admit that she would have been the same if the shoe had been on the other foot.

"I suppose from the moment you make a commitment," Richard replied with a frown. "Is that not the usual way?"

Rose shrugged. "I suppose it depends on how honourable a person is. As for myself, I believe that once a couple is betrothed, no one else is allowed to come between them. Do you agree?"

"Of course," Richard said with nod. "An engagement should never be taken lightly..."

Sophia didn't hear the rest of Richard's words because her sister chose that moment to return to the drawing-room. The young woman appeared livid and ready to wage war. Sophia watched Elizabeth look through the crowd until the woman's eyes landed on Sophia. A look of loathing flashed in her sister's eyes, sending chills down Sophia's spine.

I thought that Elizabeth would be happy about being with Richard. Why is she so angry at me?

Sophia didn't know, but something must have been said to earn her sister's anger, or had Elizabeth always been angry and had just simply been hiding it well? The latter seemed probable, which only served to confuse Sophia. Elizabeth had been friendly and kind lately, even helping Sophia to get ready and look her best for this very evening. Had it all merely been a ploy to trick her?

Sophia touched her temple, feeling a growing pressure and the throbbing pain that seemed to increase every few seconds. Her head felt like it was about to explode. She needed to get away before her emotions got the better of her and embarrassed her.

"Please excuse me, but I must go," she said, already stepping away.

"Go where?" Richard asked.

"Let me accompany you," Rose insisted.

Sophia put her palms out, avoiding anyone's touch. "No, no, I will be fine. I simply need a moment. Please, excuse me."

Sophia turned and hurried away, her head down as she weaved her way through the guests. The smell of body odour and strong perfume made her feel worse, causing her chest to burn. If she didn't leave the room soon, she was going to do something that she would regret.

With one last push, Sophia made it outside the drawing-room, taking in great gulps of air. Her head was still pounding, but her nausea had abated to bubble just below the surface.

She heard people coming her way, so she quickly hid behind a large vase and waited for them to pass. To her annoyance, they paused a few steps away from the drawing-room entrance, but it was their conversation that had her leaning closer to hear what they had to say.

"Did you notice when Elizabeth left and Richard followed soon after?" a woman asked.

"I think everyone noticed, Annie," a man said. "It was too obvious not to."

"I feel so terrible for them," Annie announced. "They have been reduced to meeting in private just to talk to each other like lovers would. I would hate it if someone separated you from me, Edgar."

Sophia hung her head, being careful not to hit the vase and call attention to herself. She was so tired of hearing people go on about Elizabeth and Richard's great love story. If it had been so great, why hadn't Richard put up more of a fight? Why hadn't his parents paid the gossip to admit that she had lied? Anything would have done!

"Do not worry, my bumblebee," Edgar assured. "I would never allow someone to come between us. Certainly not someone so unattractive."

Sophia felt that was a silly comment to make. It wasn't that he had

called her unattractive that had made it ridiculous, but he had claimed that he would only allow a more beautiful woman to separate him from Annie. Had the woman picked that up?

"I know you wouldn't, Eddie-Poo," Annie replied in a sickeningly sweet voice. "We belong together just as much as Elizabeth and Richard belong together. I am so grateful that we have our whole lives ahead of us to look forward to while they only have misery. Sophia is the only one who stands to gain anything from this situation."

Really? Sophia wanted to say. Because she would gladly swap places with any woman who believed such a stupid thing. Who were Annie and Edgar anyway?

She peered around the vase, surprised to know that she recognised the young man. However, she knew him as Jonathan and not Edgar. The man was from a village not far from Sophia's countryside residence.

Does he not have a fiancée back home? I vaguely remember something like that. If that is the truth, Annie will have a heartbreak on her hands sooner than she thinks.

Was it terrible that Sophia did not feel sorry for the woman?

The couple eventually went inside, allowing Sophia to leave her hiding place and race up the stairs to her room. She was not going to go down for the rest of the night no matter what anyone said, although the only two people who knew she was absent were Richard and Rose. Sophia doubted her parents would notice her truancy until the very end.

Sophia fell into her bed, fully clothed and hugged her pillow to her. She was exhausted, yet she hadn't done anything but stand about, talk, and eat. The dancing hadn't even started yet, which she was pleased about because she didn't want to dance with Richard. Everyone would only stare and judge her while feeling sorry for Elizabeth.

“I do not believe I will ever be rid of this cloud over my head,” she said aloud, her voice cracking with emotion.

Perhaps it would be better to allow the scandal to ruin her reputation and refuse to marry Richard. That option wasn't much better than marrying him and being known as the woman who stole her sister's true love. Which scenario would she be able to bear? Sophia didn't know. She just didn't know.

Chapter 14

Several Days Later

Richard stretched his legs and put aside the book he had been reading—or rather trying to read. He wasn't bookish at all, but Sophia did enjoy reading. It seemed natural to explore something she liked and hopefully have more to add to their conversations.

Unfortunately, it wasn't going too well. The book Richard had chosen was an adventure story and had seemed interesting at first, but he had quickly found it unrealistic and ridiculous. Was fiction usually like this? If that were the case, then he needed to ask Sophia what she liked about reading. Perhaps a book about art would have been better since he knew that she was a bit of an artist herself, but the idea was unappealing.

Learning about different styles, artists, and periods looked like an excellent way to put him right to sleep.

"I need to ask her if she has other interests," he mumbled to himself.

A ride to Nicholas's house seemed like a good thing to do. It was certainly better than being at home and slowly driving himself mad! Richard had not ceased to think about the Emley's dinner party since that night because his mind kept going over the moment Sophia had walked away from him.

Richard knew that something had gone wrong because she had retired

to her room before the party was over and was not seen by anyone for the remainder of the evening. To top it all off, her friend had looked at him as the lowest scum of the earth before walking away from him as well. Did she know something he didn't?

Sighing, Richard rubbed his face and stood up. There was no point in being in the library. He might as well leave and head to Nicholas's residence. The man might have some advice about handling the situation because Richard had reached a dead end.

After changing into his riding attire, Richard made his way to the first floor and looked about for a servant to send a message to the stable hand to ready his horse. He thought to send Cavendish when he saw the butler make his way over to him, but that idea was quickly discarded when the man informed him that his parents wished to see him in the drawing-room.

"They could not have picked a worse time," Richard complained. "Must they see me right now? I was on my way to see Nicholas."

"They were firm about talking to you soon as you could see them."

"Very well. Thank you, Cavendish."

The butler gave a short bow and left, his coattails flapping behind him. Richard changed direction and made his way to the drawing-room, wondering what his parents had to talk about now. They only called him when something was wrong or if they had made a decision that would somehow affect him. Neither of those options appealed to him.

A short knock at the open door drew his parents' attention. They stopped talking and looked up, their movements mirroring each other.

"Come in, son," his father said. "There's no use standing at the doorway like some stranger. Take a seat. We have much to discuss."

Richard didn't like the sound of that. He settled into an armchair facing his parents, bracing himself for whatever they were about to tell him. The last time he had been called like this had been to inform him about the scandal and marriage ultimatum. Surely, nothing could be worse than that?

"Are you off somewhere?" his mother asked, looking at his attire.

"I am going to see Nicholas for the afternoon. I haven't seen him since the Emley dinner party."

"You haven't seen Sophia either," his mother reminded him. "I thought perhaps you would have made a little more effort to court her."

His mother made it seem so easy. If only she knew the mental torture he had been putting himself through for the last few days just trying to understand the woman who would become his wife in a few months. Richard had never been so out of his depth before when dealing with women.

"I haven't been as slack as you assume," he said. "I've done a little research into the things that interest her so we can have better

conversations.”

Although there wasn't much wrong with their conversations now. It simply took a while for Sophia to warm up, but Richard found that talking to her was natural and enjoyable once she was comfortable. That had been a pleasant surprise considering that she had done everything she could to dismiss him.

“I'm surprised,” his mother admitted. “I didn't think you would put any effort in getting to know your future wife. You seemed resistant towards her at first.”

Richard was just as surprised. “I will inevitably marry Sophia, so why not try to make it work? I should know more about my fiancée before I marry her.”

“You'll have to hurry that up,” his father advised. “You don't have much time left before the wedding.”

“Several months is enough, Father.”

“Try three weeks,” the Duke returned. “The Emleys, your mother, and I have decided to move the wedding. There really is no reason to wait until autumn.”

Had he heard them right? “Three weeks? I'm getting married in three weeks?”

"Yes, son," his mother replied. "We thought it best to bring the date forward, so now I get to plan a summer wedding!"

Richard sat back in his chair, stunned by his parents' announcement. "Why?" he asked. "Why change the date?"

Had his parents perhaps found out about him meeting Elizabeth in the garden? He hoped not. Nothing untoward had happened, but anything could easily be misconstrued to seem much worse.

"I realised it was silly to prolong the wedding," the Duchess explained. "Besides, the banners have been read, and I have most of the preparations in place. I imagine Sophia's parents are informing her of the change as well."

Richard could only imagine how Sophia would take the news. She was just as resistant to the marriage idea, but he doubted she would put up a fight. Sophia's love for her parents overshadowed everything else.

"Shouldn't you have consulted Sophia and me before making that decision?" he asked them. "We are both of age, after all. We should have more of a say in what goes on with our wedding."

"Your right to contribute flew out of the window the moment you decided to kiss the woman," the Duke said. "It's our responsibility as your parents to ensure that the right decisions are made. If it were up to you, this wedding would not happen at all, and Sophia's reputation would be ruined. I think you can see why we have taken control of the situation."

That still didn't explain why the wedding date had been moved. Everyone knew he was betrothed to Sophia—what would waiting a few months do?

“May I go?” Richard asked.

Richard really needed advice, but not the sort his parents could give him. Nicholas was the only one who knew everything about the situation. Hopefully, the man would have some advice on how to approach Sophia. It seemed imperative that he see her now and fix whatever was wrong between them. It momentarily struck him as strange that he was more concerned with Sophia's feelings than getting married in three weeks, but he brushed the thought aside. One thing at a time.

“Do you not have any more questions?” his mother inquired.

Richard shrugged. “What is there to ask? I am getting married in three weeks. There is nothing more to it.”

“Then yes, you may go,” the Duke answered. “Pass along our regards to Nicholas.”

Richard promised to do so and left them to their discussion. His mind was buzzing with thoughts about his changed situation. Sophia would not like this at all, and would likely blame him for their parents' sudden decision.

“I don't need another reason for her to dislike me,” he muttered to himself.

By the time Richard reached Nicholas's house, he had come up with an idea to see Sophia and find out how she was. The last thing he needed was an angry fiancée. Now, with the wedding taking place in less than a month, Richard felt alarmed that he was no closer to knowing who Sophia really was. He didn't even understand why he wanted to know the woman, considering how he had felt about her at first, but things had changed.

Richard wasted no time letting his friend know everything that had happened, including his meeting in the garden with Elizabeth. Nicholas shook his head at that, his expression displeased.

"When are you going to learn?" the man asked. "How could you meet Elizabeth at your own engagement party? I heard the rumours that you had met privately with her, but I hadn't believed them. I didn't think you foolish enough to insult your fiancée."

"It wasn't like that at all," Richard protested. "I felt that I owed it to her to find out what she wanted to say. I didn't expect her to badmouth her own sister. I left once I told her that her sister wasn't to blame, that I had been the one to kiss her."

"Did she believe you?"

"No."

"That's what I thought. You're adding fuel to the fire, Richard," Nicholas warned. "This is a tricky situation already. What if Sophia found out about you meeting her sister in the garden?"

The thought had crossed his mind, but Richard had been too afraid to really consider it. If Sophia did know, then it would explain the hurt he had seen in her eyes before she had run away to her room. A memory about Rose's words had him covering his eyes and groaning.

“What is it?” asked Nicholas.

“Rose kept asking me what I think about faithfulness, and I couldn't understand why. I think I know why.”

“Rose Pilkington?”

“Yes. Do you know her?”

“Somewhat,” Nicholas said vaguely. “I was seated next to her at the dinner table. She's an interesting woman.”

Why did Richard feel there was more to be said regarding the woman? However, his situation with Sophia took precedence right now. Asking about Rose would come later.

“She doesn't like me, and if my assumptions are correct, then I have made a grave mistake. If Rose thinks I have been unfaithful to Sophia, then Sophia must think so as well.”

"It's likely," Nicholas agreed. "What will you do now?"

"I obviously need to see her, so I've decided a promenade through the Park would be best. That way, everyone can see that I am with her and not ashamed to have her walk beside me. That might go a long way to assuring Sophia that I do not intend to humiliate her."

"Is this still part of your challenge to make her like you?" asked Nicholas.

Was it? Richard thought about that for a moment and realised that hadn't been the case lately. He felt differently about his reasons for getting the woman to like him; he didn't feel he could use his pride as an excuse any longer. The little time Richard had spent with Sophia at the party continued to show him that there was more to his fiancée than just being the woman everyone loved to mock for her lack of conformity.

"No, it's not," he finally said. "Sophia is a lovely person, and she has good reason not to like me. However, I want her to see that I'm not pointing the finger at her, nor will I reject her."

Nicholas actually smiled at that. "That's what I wanted to hear, but you had best get a move on if you wish to convince her before the wedding."

That was precisely what Richard planned to do.

Richard stood near the Serpentine River, waiting for Sophia to arrive. He had no idea what to expect once she arrived, but had warned himself that he would probably have to work hard to convince Sophia to speak to him as she had during their engagement dinner.

"She's late," he murmured, looking at his pocket watch. "Twenty-three minutes late, to be exact."

Had she decided to go back on her word? Sophia didn't seem like the type of person who would do that. Richard just had to believe that she was running late and would appear at any minute. His optimism paid off when he saw her approaching— Rose and Lady Smethwick on either side of her.

Richard decided to meet them halfway, praying that Sophia would give him a chance to...to do what? Prove that he was a good person? He hadn't been very successful so far.

"Good day, ladies," he greeted.

"Good day, Lord Brittingham," the Viscountess greeted. "You look strapping in your walking clothes."

Richard noted that neither Sophia nor Rose greeted him or even looked at him. This was not a good start, but he had anticipated it.

"And you all look lovely," he returned. "Shall we begin our walk?"

Thankfully, the Viscountess stepped aside so he could fall into step with Sophia.

“How are you, Sophia?” Richard asked, willing her to look at him.

“Well, thank you.”

The woman moved away from him, pretending to adjust her parasol, but she was just manoeuvring her friend to walk between them. The sudden move surprised him, but Richard pretended not to notice. He planned to return to her side as soon as possible, but he was content to have Rose between them for now.

“The Serpentine is sparkling quite prettily under the sun,” Lady Smethwick remarked. “But I look forward to skating on it during winter.”

“I didn't realise that you skate, my lady,” said Richard.

“Oh, I do, but I'm not terribly good at it. Sophia is the one who enjoys it the most.”

Richard looked over at Sophia, who kept her gaze ahead. “Perhaps we should come back to London after our wedding to do some skating,” he suggested. “We would have returned from our honeymoon then.”

Richard had no idea why he mentioned the honeymoon, but it felt right. It seemed to embarrass Sophia, though.

“If that is what you wish,” she said, her cheeks pink.

“We’ll only do it if that is what you want,” Richard insisted. “We can remain in the countryside or spend some time in London. I give you the full rights to decide.”

Sophia looked at him briefly, her eyes questioning, but she said nothing. Did she think he was putting on an act for her aunt's sake? Or was she simply surprised that he had spoken about the future so freely? Richard found that he genuinely wanted to know, but he would not get much out of her if she continued to hide behind her friend and Lady Smethwick’s presence.

“Do you ladies mind if I walk with my fiancée alone?” he asked. “We’ll remain within sight.”

“Yes, of course!” the Viscountess readily agreed. “Go along with Lord Brittingham, Sophia. Rose and I will walk together.”

Sophia looked reluctant, but Richard knew she wouldn't argue in front of her aunt. She respected her elders better than most people he knew.

He held out his arm to Sophia, waiting for her to take it before drawing her away from her place of comfort. Richard took them far enough to have some privacy, but he made sure that they could see the other two women at all times.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me today,” he said.

Sophia nodded, saying nothing. Knowing that getting her to speak would be challenging, he continued.

“I take it that your parents have told you about the wedding date change?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

“Whatever will be, will be,” she said.

“I suppose so, but I do wish they had consulted us before making the decision. We know that we will marry each other, and we are old enough to make our own decisions. We should have been given some control over our own wedding.”

“We lost that control when we brought scandal to our families,” Sophia replied. “This is a consequence of your actions.”

Richard didn't mind what she said. He was simply glad that she was speaking to him.

"I admit to my mistake and wish to make the most of the situation. I understand that marrying each other is the last thing you wanted, but it's not something we can change."

"I'm well aware of that," she answered. "We wouldn't be standing next to each other right now if not for the scandal."

Richard finished off what he felt she wanted to say but didn't. "I know that we barely knew each other before, and I was part of the group that mocked you, but things have changed since then. I know you're not the woman everyone has insisted you are, and while you might not like me, I can honestly say that I am intrigued by you."

That earned him a surprised look. "You are?"

"Isn't it obvious? You're the first woman to have ever rejected me. I'm not used to that. Not even my charms were enough to win you over. That both surprised and interested me."

"So, I'm a specimen to be observed?"

"You're a woman that I would like to get to know," he clarified. "We'll be married soon, and we barely know anything about each other."

Sophia stopped walking and lowered her parasol behind her. "Is this necessary, Richard? I know that you are not truly interested in knowing me, and I cannot commit myself to believe that you want to. I take it your mother put you up to this?"

"No!" Richard immediately denied. "Nothing of the sort. I meant it when I said that I do wish to know the woman I'll marry soon. When you find something or someone interesting, isn't it normal to wish to know them?"

"It is," she agreed. "But this is not a normal situation. I'm well aware that you prefer my sister and that I am the last woman you would ever consider marrying. I know that I disgust most people and will never fit in. Do not pretend to believe otherwise."

Society, him included, had done this woman an injustice. Richard was ashamed to have ever judged Sophia without knowing her. What was this obsession with believing everything people said without first determining if the story was true or not? Perhaps there would be fewer scandals and wounded people if everyone learned that.

"Yes, I did like your sister, but I am marrying you, Sophia. That must count for something. I do not intend to carry on an affair with your sister if that is what you think."

Sophia's coloured, looking away. That is what she had thought! Did she really believe him to be an unscrupulous man?

"I'm a fool at times, but I'm not dishonourable," Richard insisted. "I would never disrespect you like that, Sophia. Once a Hatherton marries, he remains faithful to that woman for the rest of his life. We do not dally in affairs."

"Then I suppose you'll be a miserable man," she remarked.

“Why?”

“Because you'll be married to me. You cannot tell me that you look forward to being my husband.”

“I did not look forward to marrying anyone, to tell the truth,” he admitted. “I wanted to hold off on it for as long as possible, but fate had other ideas.”

Sophia frowned for a moment and abruptly started walking. What was she thinking now?

“You believe me, don't you?” he pressed.

“I do not know. As you said, we barely know each other.”

“Then let us remedy it,” Richard suggested. “Tell me about yourself, and I'll do the same. Let's get to know each other better, so we will not be strangers when we speak our vows on our wedding day. I know not of your opinion, but *I* do not wish to marry a stranger.”

Sophia didn't answer him but carried on walking. Richard was about to accept his defeat when she surprised him by sighing and coming to a halt.

“Very well. We can exchange information about each other, but I want

to do it sitting down. I'm afraid I might fall from the sheer fright of sharing anything personal with Lord Brittingham.”

Richard laughed, more from relief than amusement. It startled her.

“You continue to amaze me, Sophia Emley. Come, there's a lovely spot under that tree.”

He led her to the area, letting her sit and settle with her back to the tree before taking up the patch of grass beside her. They could still see Rose and Lady Smethwick up ahead, their heads close together as they discussed whatever they were talking about. Richard had a feeling it was about him and Sophia, and hopefully, the Viscountess was putting in a good word for him—Rose certainly wouldn't.

“So, what do you wish to know about me?” Sophia asked. Then, more quietly, she added, “I cannot believe we are actually doing this.”

“We are, and I have many questions, but let's start with your favourite colour, food, animal and season.”

A ghost of a smile appeared on Sophia's lips. “Do you really wish to know these things?”

“I wouldn't ask if I didn't.”

“Very well. My favourite colour is gold, I absolutely adore a simple pot roast of lamb and potatoes, and I love dogs. I actually love most

animals, but Freki and Geri are my favourites."

"Your Great Danes?"

She looked at him in surprise. "You remembered!"

"You'll soon find that I remember quite a lot." Especially anything about her. "Their names come from Norse Mythology, don't they?"

"Yes. They are the two wolves that accompany Odin. I didn't think you would recognise their names. Not many people do."

"I randomly came across it in a book," he said, not admitting that he had been perusing certain books to read just to find things in common with her. At least it was paying off now.

"Colourme impressed. Now, you should tell me about yourself. It's only fair."

Richard noted that Sophia appeared relaxed;she was no longer gripping her parasol like a lifeline.

"What would you like to know?"

"May I ask anything?"

“Within reason. I'm not ready to share anything embarrassing just yet.”

Sophia smiled, the sight dazzling. It lit up her whole face and let him see the woman that she hid from the rest of the world.

“I'll be mindful of that. I think I wish to know about your childhood. Tell me about memories that stand out for you.”

Richard was taken aback by the question. No one had ever asked him something like that before. He took a while to answer as he wasn't quite sure where to start.

“I suppose one of my earliest memories are the tricks I used to get up to as a boy, or perhaps swimming in the lake with the servants' children during long summer days. There are many to talk about.”

“Start with your mischievous ways,” she insisted. “You must have given your parents many headaches.”

“Something like that,” he said, grinning.

Richard launched into tales about his childhood, telling Sophia things he had believed were long forgotten. She laughed a lot, encouraging him to continue. Had he ever had such a conversation with a woman?

Rose and the Viscountess arrived sometime after, complaining of hunger and fatigue. Richard wanted to tell them to go home and leave him with Sophia, but that would be ridiculous. He parted ways with them and decided to take a walk rather than return to his carriage.

I didn't expect to have such a good time with Sophia. I do not think I have experienced anything quite like it to compare, and that's saying something.

Sophia was undoubtedly unlike any woman Richard had ever met. Not once did he feel he had to be charming because she would have seen right through him. Sophia wasn't a woman who needed flattery, but honesty and an impartial attitude. The most important thing he would take away from today was the way she had listened to him. Sophia had wanted nothing but his truth, and that was worth so much to him.

Chapter 15

The walk back to Aunt Caroline's carriage was a mix between wanting to smile and not wanting to smile. Sophia didn't know which was worse.

"Did you enjoy your walk, dear?" her aunt asked. "Or, should I say sit-down?"

"Both were good, Aunt Caroline, but I think I preferred the sitting part."

"I would enjoy the sitting part as well if I were seated next to such a lovely looking man," the older woman remarked. "I cannot recall if your uncle was that handsome. Mind you, I didn't marry him for his looks but his title."

"Aunt Caroline!" Sophia admonished, but Rose only laughed.

"This is precisely why I like you, Lady Smethwick," said Rose. "Your honesty is a breath of fresh air. The right type of honesty, mind you. Not the sort that people go about stating as truth but is just the dribble of the world."

"Why do you think I keep you around?" the Viscountess asked her. "You're good for my ego."

Everyone laughed, which was a great relief for Sophia because she needed an outlet for the emotions swirling within her. She was so... elated, and she didn't know if her feet were actually touching the ground. Who would have thought that time spent in Richard's company would feel so exhilarating?

Sophia wanted to twirl around, sing with the birds, kiss a baby, pick a flower and put it into her hair, and a whole lot of other things that gleeful people do. There was a little part of her that warned her not to get caught up in fleeting emotions—but she didn't want to listen to that voice today.

"Why don't we go to my house first?" her aunt suggested. "It's closer, and we can have tea and something light to eat. I'm certain your mothers will not mind since you are with me."

Sophia and Rose readily agreed, not wanting to go to their respective homes just yet. Rose naturally wanted to avoid her mother because the Frenchwoman had not ceased talking about Nicholas. Sophia felt sorry for her, but she did wonder if her friend had any feelings towards the man. Rose certainly spoke highly of him.

Sophia's reasons for staying out longer were obvious. Elizabeth had continued to be friendly, but it was strained, as though she were acting. Sophia could not forget her sister's expression when they had locked eyes at the dinner party. They had played on her mind until she had driven herself to paint something that was terribly beautiful and unlike her at all.

The painting was currently hidden away in her room because she was afraid of showing it to anyone. How would Sophia explain it? The artwork depicted a man who resembled the Adonis statue she had once come across. He was holding a woman whose face was hidden while his hand stretched towards a magnificent beauty who appeared

to rise out of the fire wearing nothing but flames as her covering.

The fire-woman was beckoning to the man, her sultry mouth parted as though singing a song for him to come closer, beckoning the man to burn with her. The man's face seemed eager to go, but his body also appeared to be desperately holding the woman in his arms. Sophia didn't want to know what it meant to her.

Avoiding Elizabeth was the only way for Sophia to have a moment to herself. Since the wedding had been announced as being only three weeks away, their mother had become something of a monster for details. Nothing was too small or big to worry about, including Sophia's beauty regime.

The Emley matriarch insisted that Sophia take on Elizabeth's beauty rituals to prepare for her wedding day, and she could no longer wear anything considered too plain. That meant a purge of her wardrobe and a team of seamstresses to create her new style and trousseau.

Richard's mother had insisted on helping with the new wardrobe as well, including purchasing jewellery and other accessories. Sophia knew that her sister was jealous, but Elizabeth was careful not to show it. Only a person who knew her well could pick up on the slight changes in her voice and eyes.

"I'm excited about your wedding, dear," her aunt said once they were safely cloistered inside the carriage. "It has been a long time since I've attended the wedding of someone I like."

"Why attend weddings of people you do not like?" asked Rose.

"Because I am the Viscountess of Emmerdale and a wealthy woman by any account. Who wouldn't want me at their wedding? And I do find it challenging to say no at times. I may not like a person, but I certainly do not wish to make them an enemy by snubbing their invitation."

"I do not think I would want to be a titled woman," Rose remarked. "The responsibility is more than I can handle. However, our Sophia will soon become the Countess of Brittingham, and eventually a Duchess. It is curious, but I think you'll do very well, Soph. You have that regal air about you."

Sophia rolled her eyes and snorted. "By regal, do you mean cold? An ice queen?"

Those were the names the ton had given her, and they were much nicer than the ones her peers bestowed upon her.

"No. Regal like a queen," Rose insisted. "I do not think Elizabeth would have fit the role well. It's a good thing Richard kissed you instead, but I still haven't decided if I like him."

"Rose!" Sophia scolded, darting eyes at her aunt.

The older woman looked faintly amused, but she wasn't shocked. "I must say I agree with Rose, dear. Your sister would not have been a good fit for the Hatherton family. I should know as I have been acquainted with them for many years. And I do not believe in coincidences, but fate. Richard was meant to kiss you."

Had they both gone completely mad? The kiss had simply been a terrible misunderstanding, not some fated act.

“Your notions are far too romantic for comfort,” Sophia told them. “Promise me neither of you will talk like this in front of others—I do not need any more rumours with my name attached to them.”

“Noted, although that will not stop the rumours, dear,” her aunt said. “Better the rumours you know than the ones you don't.”

That didn't make sense to Sophia. She was still trying to figure out what on earth her aunt had said when they pulled up in front of the woman's home.

“We're here, my lovelies,” the Viscountess announced. “And none too soon. I was about to faint from serious hunger pangs.”

They were helped out of the carriage by a footman who chatted with the Viscountess as though they were great friends. Sophia's aunt seemingly had that relationship on everyone, rich or poor.

To Sophia's left was the entrance into the very garden where it had all started. It felt so long ago, but only weeks had passed since the incident. Never could she have imagined that one crazy moment would lead to a wedding mere weeks later. Sophia never believed she would ever get married, and now she was engaged to Richard Hatherton, of all people. When would she wake up from her dream?

“Leave your parasols at the door, dears,” her aunt said. “Go ahead to my private parlour while I freshen up a bit. I'll meet you there in a

moment or two.”

The girls walked arm-in-arm to the oriental-themed room, excited to see what new additions Aunt Caroline had made to the room. The woman was obsessed with the Far East and had redecorated her parlour to resemble a Qing emperor's private quarters.

The first thing one noticed when they walked inside was the colour explosion. There wasn't a dull area to be seen; from the throne of carved dragons with inserts of jade and gold to the texts housed behind glass and porcelain tea sets dotted about the place...it was all rather magical.

"Your aunt is the worthiest of people to know," Rose breathed. "Look at those vases! And that massive dragon on the wall. Wouldn't that give one nightmares?"

"Aunt Caroline is the nightmare in the best possible way," said Sophia. "Nothing scares her."

"I suppose you're right. Where does she get all these things? I cannot imagine any English person making any of these pieces."

Sophia had a feeling her aunt had bought many of the items from the very merchant that had sold the screen to her father, but she didn't say as much. It wouldn't do to accuse one's relative of having anything to do with a known criminal.

"I imagine they were imported," she informed her friend. "They look too authentic to be something made in this country. I cannot wait to

see what she does next with this room, but for now, we'll enjoy the beauty of the Forbidden City."

"Forbidden City? Why call it that?"

"The rooms reminds me of the splendour one would likely find in the Forbidden City. It's the imperial palace of several dynastic emperors."

Rose shook her head. "I keep forgetting that you are a walking book of information. Come, let's sit and you can tell me about your time with Richard. I have been dying to ask you, but I didn't want to do so in front of your aunt."

Sophia was grateful for that. While she loved her aunt, the woman could be a bit much at times.

"I think we have ample time to talk about it," said Sophia. "Aunt Caroline usually takes her time."

They both curled up on the same couch, their feet tucked under them as they faced each other.

"So...did you enjoy your time with the handsome Earl?"

Sophia couldn't help her smile. "I suppose so."

"There is no supposing, Soph. You either did, or you did not. Which is it? Although, judging from your face, I would say it was a lovely time indeed. Is he forgiven for the other evening?"

Sophia didn't want to be reminded of that night. It had been hurtful, and not an evening she wanted to repeat.

"I do not wish to recall much of that night, but I will say that I was comfortable with Richard today. He put me at ease, and somehow, he encouraged me to talk more than I usually would. It was an odd, but good, experience."

It had been better than good, but there was no reason to give the moment an overly glowing review. No one needed to know everything she was thinking.

"Based on today, do you still feel the same way about our Earl?" Rose asked. "I know you did not like him at all, but he seems to have influenced you otherwise."

Sophia laid her head on the couch as she thought about her feelings for Richard. What could she say? The man was confusing her. Her opinion of him had been constant for some time, but he was showing a different side that made her question who he really was.

"Richard keeps surprising me," she finally admitted. "I always assumed he was shallow, vain, selfish, rude—"

"Get to the good adjectives, or we'll be here all day," Rose interrupted, laughing.

"I do not know if they are just as long," Sophia said, grinning.

"Either way, I wish to hear what you think about him now."

Sophia gnawed on her bottom lip as she put her thoughts into order. "Well," she began. "He is attentive, and he's a good listener. It's not easy to put me at ease, but he manages it. You know that I'm not a person who reveals herself, yet Richard pushed himself past those boundaries and somehow encouraged me to tell him things that I would never share with a person like him."

"Perhaps he is hiding his true self from the world," Rose suggested.

Why would Richard do that? He had everything he could possibly want and didn't need the approval of others—he was the one they sought approval *from*. Why hide himself?

"If that is true, he has done a splendid job of hiding it," said Sophia.

Rose shifted, bringing her feet forward and sitting cross-legged. "What did you talk about?"

"He asked me about my favourite things, and I asked him about his childhood."

“He must be courting you,” Rose insisted.

Courting her? Sophia doubted it. Richard had admitted to wanting to get to know her for the sake of making their marriage work, but she still had her doubts about that.

"I do not think of it a courtship but a necessity to know the stranger you will marry."

“The man walked with you in an area where everyone can see you,” Rose reminded her. “He was making it known that he is not ashamed of you, or that is what I believe. I still do not fully trust him, but I would be foolish to ignore that he is making an effort. Most men in his position wouldn't do such a thing.”

Rose was right. Most men would have run away or have tried anything to avoid marrying her. Richard had accepted it and didn't even seem angry about it. Was she still angry?

I do not know. I feel I should be, because everyone still believes that I trapped Richard and stole my sister's true love—but speaking with him today seems to have made everything easier to bear. I do not know how I will feel once I return home and look into Elizabeth's eyes, but I feel at ease for the moment.

Sophia wondered about her upcoming wedding and the married life she would have as Rose continued to vocalise her opinion of Richard. Perhaps getting married to him would not be such a terrible thing; not if Richard continued to show this new side of him.

Aunt Caroline came in a little later, ending their conversation but earning their amazement at her colourful attire.

“Do you like it?” she asked them, twirling around.

Sophia couldn't tell if her aunt was wearing a gown or a dress that wasn't quite complete, but whatever it was, it was beautiful.

“Well...” said Rose, seemingly at a loss for words.

"It's astounding, Aunt Caroline," Sophia finished for her. "What on earth is it, and where did you get it?"

The Viscountess beamed before throwing herself onto the couch like the histrionic she was.

"It's just a little something I saw in a book, and I had my seamstress make it. It's called a kimono, but I chose to change it in the front, so it falls open and reveals the dress underneath."

Sophia and Rose left their seats to admire the creation closely, tracing the design of peonies, chrysanthemums, wisteria and fans with their fingers.

“The material is beautiful, my lady,” said Rose. “What is it?”

“Damask silk and metallic threads. I had my seamstress dye the silk with safflower to produce the reddish-orange colour, but I also have a blue and purple one in my armoire. I doubt anyone has something like this in their wardrobe.”

Sophia could believe that. Not everyone was as eccentric as Aunt Caroline, but she was certainly someone to look up to.

“I wonder if Mama would let me have something like this,” Sophia wondered aloud.

“If I gift one to you, she will simply have to accept it, wouldn't she?” said the Viscountess.

“Oh, I could never take one from you,” Sophia protested. “It's far too lovely.”

“Nonsense, dear. Think of it as an early wedding gift. I'll have the blue one folded and boxed up for you to take home today. Just make sure that your sister does not try to talk it into her hands.”

Feeling pleased and thankful, Sophia promised her aunt that she would do just that. They all sat down to tea soon after, and even that was a lavish affair. The Viscountess was not someone who believed in mediocrity, and that belief was slowly rubbing off on Sophia. She would likely never be as flamboyant as her aunt, but that did not mean she could not show more of her creative side to the rest of the world. Richard seemed to like it, didn't he?

It does not matter what he likes! Do not make yourself a sitting duck for

disappointment, Sophia Emley.

Rose and Sophia were disappointed when they had to leave, but it was rather late, and their mothers would begin to fuss. They said their goodbyes to the Viscountess, chattering gaily in the carriage as it returned them to their homes. Rose was first to get off, leaving Sophia to travel the rest of the journey home alone. It was then that her happiness started to go downhill.

* * *

Sophia slowly walked up the front steps to the door, dreading what she might encounter once she entered the house. She might be overthinking it all, but she couldn't help the feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach.

Rubbing her belly, she opened the door and found no one around. That was unusual. Typically Mallory would be marching through the hallway, but perhaps Sophia had come when the butler was having his tea in the kitchen. Should she let her parents know that she had arrived?

"I would be foolish not to," she told herself.

That decided, she looked in the likeliest place for Mr and Mrs Emley, finding them in the drawing-room.

"Hello, dear!" her mother greeted cheerfully. "You have finally returned. How was your day?"

“Lovely, thank you. I need to freshen up before dinner, so I'll tell you about it when I come back.”

“Of course,” her mother said. “You must be tired after all that walking. Perhaps you should have a little nap as dinner will be a little late this evening. Cook had a mishap with the stove.”

Sophia wondered what mishap that was but didn't want to ask just yet. She really wanted some time to herself before indulging her family.

I wonder where Elizabeth is?

Sophia didn't have to wonder for much longer, for her sister met her at the top of the stairs and all but pounced on her.

“Sophia!” she cried, taking her arm. “I wondered when you would be back. Let's go to your room so you can tell me all about your day.”

“I wish to have a rest and then refresh myself for dinner, Lizzy. Can we talk about it later?”

“No. I simply must hear about it now, or I will burst with curiosity. Surely you can rest afterwards?”

Sophia wanted to insist, but she could see the mood her sister was in.

Elizabeth looked a little crazed, almost as though her entire day had been spent thinking about Sophia coming back and talking about her day. It was a bit frightening.

“Very well, but give me a moment to catch my breath,” Sophia asked. “I do feel tired.”

“You can catch your breath on the bed.”

Sophia frowned, not liking how demanding Elizabeth was. Even the grip around her arm seemed too tight, and no matter how she tried to gently pull away, Elizabeth would simply hold on tighter.

Do not be alarmed. This is just Elizabeth. Perhaps she is excited for me and cannot contain herself.

Sophia doubted it even as she thought it.

Elizabeth was the one who pushed open Sophia's door, not caring that it banged against the wall and shut behind them from the force of the younger woman's hand. Sophia found herself led to the bed and sat down before her sister took a seat beside her and looked at her expectantly.

“Tell me about your walk with Richard,” she commanded.

Sophia thought about lying, but she decided that her sister deserved to know the truth.

"It went well, thank you. Richard was kind, and we had a good conversation about our lives. He thought it was a good idea to get to know each other before we're married."

"Indeed? What else? Were you alone with him the whole time?"

"Most of the time, yes," Sophia replied. "We sat beneath a tree while Rose and Aunt Caroline walked somewhere ahead of us."

It was then that Sophia remembered she had left her aunt's gift in the carriage. She almost groaned out loud but knew her sister would want to know why. Sophia didn't want to mention the gift just yet.

"That sounds...nice," Elizabeth said, smiling broadly; her eyes, however, remained unmoved. "I remember sitting with Richard beneath a tree. It was a lovely time."

"I'm sure it was. He is a good listener."

"The best!" Elizabeth exclaimed, and then her facial expression unexpectedly fell to reveal a dejected woman. "I cannot explain how much I miss him, Saffi," she sniffed. "There isn't a day that I do not cry from my heartbroken state. How I wish I was in your shoes. I would have loved to have been the one to marry Richard."

Sophia didn't know what to say. It was an awkward thing to be the one marrying the man her sister claimed to love. What was a woman to do

in such a quagmire?

"I feel I must tell you something, Saffi," her sister continued, still sniffing although there were no tears. "I feel terrible about it."

"What is it?" Sophia asked, her heart in her mouth.

"Richard asked me to meet him in the garden on the night of the dinner party. I went because I love him so much, but I knew that it was wrong in the back of my head. He is marrying you, after all! Do you understand that I couldn't say no?"

Sophia knew that her sister was lying, but she nodded. "Yes, I understand."

Elizabeth smiled, her lips trembling slightly. "I knew you would. Well, Richard was quite emotional when I went to see him. He confessed that he loves me still and...and feels terrible that he has to marry you instead. I'm so sorry, Saffi."

Sophia was sorry as well—sorry that she had let herself believe Richard would give up his love for Elizabeth. He had said he would never cheat on her, but what would he call this? They were engaged, yet he had secretly met with her sister and confessed his love to her.

"I'm also sorry, Lizzy," Sophia said softly. "Sorrier than you can ever imagine."

Chapter 16

Richard's fingers drummed the oak armrests under his fingers, his eyes restless as they travelled from the door to his mother, and back again. The Duchess appeared blissful as she stitched an intricate rose design, even humming an unknown tune under her breath.

"What time did you give them, Mother?" he asked.

The Duchess paused, her graceful hand poised in the air, a long, pink thread trailing from the needle she held between her index and thumb.

"Two o'clock, son. Did I not mention this before?"

She had, but Richard needed to hear her confirmation once again. "Oh, yes," he replied. "So you did. It's quarter to two right now-- do you suppose they are running late?"

His mother observed him for several seconds, her head slightly tilted. Could she see his excitement? Richard had worked at not making it too obvious, but perhaps he didn't have it under control.

"The polite thing would be to give us fifteen minutes after the agreed time to allow any last-minute preparations," his mother explained. "That gives them another half an hour to arrive."

Richard inwardly groaned. That seemed like a long time to wait. "I see. Is everything ready?"

Two faint lines quickly appeared between his mother's brows.

"Why, of course, dear!" she said, sounding affronted. "You know that I never sit until everything is ready. The Emleys need only arrive, and then we can have our tea and discuss the wedding. I'm excited to see Sophia again. I barely saw her at the dinner party."

Richard's face grew hot as he recalled what had transpired at the party. The otherwise good evening had been clouded by his little meeting in the garden with Elizabeth. The woman had confessed some things that had left him unsettled, but what had truly disturbed Richard was her insistence that Sophia was to blame for their predicament.

"You'll have ample time to speak with her today," Richard assured his mother. "But I ask you not to overwhelm her. Sophia is not a social butterfly like most women tend to be and prefers quieter company."

A half-smile lifted one side of the Duchess's lips. "Oh? Do you now know her so well? I didn't realise you had grown so close."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Mother," Richard replied hastily. "'Tis only right that I know something about the woman I shall soon marry, but that does not mean we are suddenly the best of friends."

"I didn't say best friends, son. Perhaps there is more to it than that."

Richard narrowed his eyes at his mother. What was she hinting at? The woman's smile grew into a large the-cat-that-got-the-cream grin as though she were a matchmaker watching her little puppets fall in love. Had she forgotten that this betrothal had come about through a scandal?

“What can there be?” he asked. “Do not start imagining some great love story, Mother. I know you have a romantic spirit, but I assure you this is not one of those situations.”

“Why not? You and Sophia looked rather cosy at the Emleys' dinner table—happy, even. I have never seen you smile or laugh so much at other dinner parties.”

Richard had to agree with his mother, but that didn't mean he and Sophia were falling in love. They were simply coming to an agreement and an amicable one at that. It was certainly better than being enemies!

“She is an amusing woman once you get through her frosty exterior,” he said thoughtfully. “Most people assume that is her disposition, but 'tis more like an armour.”

Sophia was a warm person under her feigned indifference and viper-quicktongue, and deserved to be treated better. Richard wished more people would give themselves the opportunity to get to know her without their prejudices clouding their perception. He still had to put in a bit of elbow grease to witness her softer side, but it was well worth the effort once he did.

Their day at Hyde Park had turned out better than Richard had hoped. Who would have thought that one day he would sit beside Sophia and carry on a conversation he wished had never ended? Certainly not him!

“And I assume you have broken through her armour?” his mother asked.

Had he broken through, or had she allowed him to slip past? Something told him it was the latter.

“Sophia is strong enough to keep her armour in place, Mother,” was Richard’s reply. “I suppose I had to show that I was worthy of seeing her true self. I doubt anyone but her family and closest friend have seen it.”

“You said friend—does she not have friends?”

It sounded pitiful to admit to having just one friend, but having several friends was not necessarily a good thing. Richard had recently learnt that after discovering Marcus and Philip’s true natures.

“Do you really need more than one?” he countered.

“Most would say yes. It shows your likeability.”

“But it seems people only like you if you have something they want, or if you look a certain way. What sort of foundation is that?”

Richard was a wealthy earl, and a handsome one at that. That had instantly made him a likeable fellow and popular with people. However, if that was the prerequisite for all friendships, it was no wonder that people like Sophia were ostracised.

“People of similar backgrounds, status, or physical appearance tend to stick together,” his mother argued. “Perhaps your looks and wealth attract them, but I'm certain 'tis your disposition that keeps them. That is the way with most friendships.”

“Judging a book by its cover,” Richard muttered with a roll of his eyes.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” He got to his feet. “I need something stronger while we wait, Mother. Tea will not suffice.”

“I think it sweet that you're nervous to see your fiancée, son.”

Richard paused, his brows drawing together to form a deep frown. “I did not say I was nervous.”

“'Tis evident by your behaviour!” his mother insisted, chuckling. “I never thought I would see the day that my son feels uncertain about himself around a woman.”

“Mother!” Richard protested. “Do not make this into something it isn't. I'm simply getting a drink because I would like one. May I get you something?”

The Duchess' laughter died away, but her smile remained. “I have no need of anything stronger than tea, son. I am not the one waiting for my betrothed.”

Richard didn't bother arguing-- it wasn't worth it. Instead, he shook his head and left the room. Women! Always looking for a romantic angle to everything. Richard wasn't nervous, just a little anxious. Why couldn't his mother...Groaning, Richard hung his head and sighed. Nervous and anxious meant the same thing.

“Why am I so nervous?” he muttered to himself.

Richard couldn't quite put his finger on the reason, but it undoubtedly had to do with Sophia. No, he was lying to himself. All of it had to do with Sophia, and he might as well admit that.

Shaking his head (he had a feeling he would be doing a lot of that in the days to come), Richard carried on to his study and stayed there—someone would just have to call him once the Emleys arrived. By then, he hoped he had his emotions under control.

* * *

Richard didn't need to be called after all—he had kept watch at his

window and spotted the Emley carriage approaching from afar, which had prompted him to rush downstairs after a brief look over in his mirror. He entered the parlour with a little more dignity; there was no need to show his mother that he had run down the stairs because he was relieved Sophia was finally here.

“You look much improved after the drink, son,” his mother commented. “The Emleys will never know that you spent the better part of the day feeling nervous.”

“Will you stop that narrative, Mother?” Richard implored her. “I am not nervous, nor was I ever nervous. I resent that comment.”

The Duchess fell silent, but her expression said it all. She was delighted and truly believed that something was brewing between him and Sophia.

I know more about Sophia, and I truly enjoy her company, but to insist on anything else is ridiculous.

Richard didn't bother telling his mother that the Emleys would be at their door any second now. That would suggest that he had been keeping watch, which would give his mother more ammunition to use against him.

When a servant finally came to announce the Emleys' arrival, the Duchess immediately looked suspiciously at Richard, but he ensured that all she could see was a calm and collected man.

“Isn't that wonderful, son?” she asked. “Sophia is finally here.”

"I suppose so," he replied quite lazily. "Although they are a bit late."

"'Tis only half-past two. Shall we meet them at the front door?"

"I'm sure Cavendish will see them through, Mother," Richard replied. "We hardly need to leave the room just to welcome them."

A puzzled expression stole over the woman's features. He wasn't acting how she had assumed he would, and now she probably doubted her earlier opinion of him. Richard almost grinned. That would work in his favour because he wouldn't put it past his mother to embarrass him by telling the Emleys how nervous he was about their arrival.

"Yes, of course," the Duchess said. "Cavendish can let them in. I wonder if Elizabeth is with them? I did extend the invitation to her as well. It wouldn't be right to leave Sophia's own sister behind."

Richard coughed, choking on his own saliva. "You invited Elizabeth?"

"Yes, dear. Why? Is there something wrong?"

Yes! There was plenty wrong with inviting the very woman who claimed to hate her sister because he was marrying her. How was he going to put up with her?

“No,” Richard eventually said. “I’m merely surprised.”

“Why? She is Sophia’s sister, and your soon-to-be sister-in-law. It’s good to include her.”

Richard inwardly groaned at the reminder. Elizabeth would soon become a permanent fixture in his life, she wouldn’t be someone he could just ignore if he grew tired of her. Would he have to deal with her supposed love for him and her hate for her sister for the rest of his life? Heaven help him.

“I’m not disputing that,” Richard assured. “I only thought she might be busy with other social events since this is her first Season.”

“Oh, I see. Well, we’ll know if she’s here in a moment. Perhaps she decided this was more important.”

Richard hoped otherwise. The afternoon would be considerably better without the bitter woman. It wasn’t that he disliked her, but her recent behaviour had left much to be desired.

I never thought I would find myself stuck between two sisters.

Not that Sophia would consider him stuck. She was willing to give him a way out, but that would entail disappointing his parents and the possible loss of his fortune. Worst of all would be Sophia’s ruined reputation. This betrothal may not have made her likeable, but it had given back her respectability. Richard didn’t want to be the one to take it away.

Richard stood up as Cavendish announced Mrs Emley and her daughters. The matriarch was first to enter, followed by Elizabeth, who looked radiant as ever. One would think she was the one getting married! Finally, Sophia trailed behind her sister, her head down. Why did she look so forlorn?

“How lovely to see you again, Patricia!” the Duchess greeted warmly. “And you, Elizabeth. You look lovely in that dress.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Elizabeth replied, dipping in a curtsy.

Richard was glad when his mother made a point of going to Sophia and enveloping her in an embrace. It was the first time the woman had done that, and it had clearly shocked Sophia. The younger woman stood still in the Duchess's arms, her luminous eyes wide with surprise.

“I'm glad to see you, dear,” the Duchess said. “The bit of green in your dress looks lovely against your complexion. Come, have a seat next to me.”

Distracted by the warm scene, Richard mumbled a greeting to Mrs Emley and Elizabeth, nearly missing the young woman's livid expression. He gave Elizabeth a second glance, frowning at her, but the woman had already schooled her features into a soft and inviting smile. The sudden change was disconcerting.

“How nice of you to invite us again, Diane,” said Mrs Emley once they were settled.

"I thought it imperative to meet again," the Duchess responded. "The wedding is mere weeks away, and there is much to discuss."

"Oh, yes!" Mrs Emley readily agreed. "I have thought of nothing else. My poor Sophia is rather rundown with all the fittings and preparations for married life, but Elizabeth has been sterling support. My daughters are extremely close to each other, you see."

The Duchess smiled, handing Mrs Emley her tea. "Oh, how lovely. I love to hear about sisters with great affection for each other. That often isn't the case. Rivalry can make siblings bitter enemies, but Sophia and Elizabeth seem to share a lovely sister bond."

Richard wanted to snort and set the record straight, but that wouldn't do Sophia any good. His fiancée currently held a cup of tea in her hand, but she wasn't drinking it. Rather, she was staring at it as though it held the answers to her life's questions. She had barely acknowledged him when he had greeted her, and had not looked once in his direction despite sitting near enough to him to do so without detection. What was wrong? Why was she so distant?

Did we not make headway at the Park? I was sure we had come to an understanding.

That certainty was slowly ebbing away. On the other hand, Elizabeth kept up a conversation with him and the older women, her gay chatter filling the room and drawing attention away from her sister's silence.

"The wedding will have to be at our chapel," the Duchess insisted. "All the people in the Hatherton family have married there."

Mrs Emley didn't look pleased, but she nodded. "Very well. I insist the wedding breakfast be at our residence. My husband and I wish to give Sophia and Richard a lovely send-off."

The pair argued about that for several minutes while Elizabeth continued to speak to him as though nothing was amiss. There was actually a huge pulsing problem in the room, and it was beginning to bother him. Richard just wanted Sophia to say something to him, and he needed their parents to stop their ongoing discussion about the wedding. He had had enough.

"Did you hear that Marcus wishes to have a riding party soon?" Elizabeth asked him. "It's just the sort of excitement we need to make the most of our summer."

The last thing Richard wanted was another party with people who had proven themselves unworthy of the friendship label. However, he saw the topic as an opportunity to engage Sophia and used it.

"Will you be going?" he asked her.

Sophia spared him a brief glance that warmed his cheeks. Yes, it was a stupid question. Marcus would never invite her.

Fool. You'll drive her away faster than you'll draw her to you.

"Sophia doesn't like such activities," said Elizabeth. "They bore her,

although 'tis her disposition that is mundane.”

Richard stilled. Elizabeth had spoken low enough that only he and Sophia had been privy to the comment, but he almost wished their mothers had heard the ugly words coming from the young woman's mouth.

Turning to Sophia, Richard's heart squeezed at how pale she had become and how hard her hands were gripping the cup. She wasn't going to defend herself, and Richard didn't know if standing up for her would worsen the relationship between the sisters.

Goodness, but this tension was suffocating! Just as he was about to get up and excuse himself, Sophia rose to her feet.

“Would you please excuse me?” she said, her voice surprisingly normal. “I feel the need for a little air.”

“Of course, dear,” the Duchess assured. “You go ahead and get some air.”

Sophia gave a weak smile and put her cup down, her hands shaking ever so slightly. She avoided everyone's eyes as she left the room, taking her floral scent with her. Richard didn't stop looking even when Sophia had disappeared from view. He wanted to go after her, to know if she was all right, but it would be too obvious to leave immediately.

Richard let five minutes or so go by before he, too, stood up.

“Please excuse me, ladies. I have just realised that I have something important to do. I shall return soon.”

His mother gave him a knowing glance. “Yes, very important, son. Best you hop off and do it.”

Richard fought his need to blush, ducking his head as he left. Why must his mother torment him so?

He didn't immediately see Sophia when he reached the garden, but he continued on, unwilling to give up. She could be behind one of the taller hedges or perhaps near the woods. The head start he had given her could have allowed Sophia to cover a lot of distance, and if his memory served him correctly, the woman could run. Fast.

“Surely she hasn't left?” he asked himself.

She wouldn't do that, would she? Sophia was different from most women, but she wasn't impulsive or foolish enough to walk home, was she? Goodness! He really wasn't confident about that.

Richard walked faster, growing increasingly alarmed as he looked behind every hedge and over every bush. Where was she? With growing stress, he looked back at the house. Had she returned to the parlour?

“No,” he muttered. “I doubt she would want to go back so soon.”

Sophia had to be somewhere around here, and he was going to—

“Oh!” Richard cried, nearly walking into a sitting woman looking into the distance.

Sophia scowled up at him and scooted a little away. “Have you no care for where you walk?”

Relieved, Richard breathed out a laugh. “You're here! For a moment, I believed you had run away.”

“Run away?” Sophia repeated. “Do not be daft. Now that you have found me, you may go. I am not returning just yet.”

Richard sat down instead. His heart was beating a tad too fast, and he needed a little rest before arguing with her. Sophia harrumphed and turned away, drawing her knees to her chest before resting her chin on them.

Silence stretched between them, and usually, he would have welcomed it, but Richard had other ideas. He needed to know what had made her pull away and how to make everything right between them again. He had grown tired of her hot and cold behaviour. It was stressful, to say the least, and had left him uncertain and confused.

“Have I done something wrong?” he asked.

Silence. Sighing, Richard angled his body towards her and shifted a little closer. Sophia drew her legs in tighter as she tilted away.

“If I have done anything to upset you—”

“You haven't,” Sophia cut in.

She still did not look at him, but her answer gave him hope. “Then why are you punishing me?”

Sophia dropped her legs, twisting her upper body towards him. “Punishing you? How on earth am I doing that?”

“You refuse to speak to me, let alone look at me. What should I think? We are to be married soon, yet one wouldn't think so by looking at the pair of us.”

Sophia groaned, lowering her head. “This is such a mess! I never wanted any of this.”

“I know, but we can make the best of it, can't we?”

Sophia lifted her head, showing him the agony in her eyes. “You do not understand, Richard. I cannot live knowing that I took my sister's happiness away. I...I think I wish to call off the wedding.”

Stunned, Richard drew away. "What?"

"Yes," Sophia insisted. "I do not mind if my reputation is ruined, you see. Elizabeth's happiness means more to me. You and my sister can get married instead, and I'll be glad knowing that she is no longer heartbroken."

What kind of woman was she? Richard had never known anyone else to be this selfless, and while he marvelled at her courage, he still found her barking mad.

"Absolutely not!" he exclaimed. "Tis far too late to change your mind now, Sophia. We are getting married whether you like it or not."

"But—"

"No," Richard insisted. "The wedding date has been set, the arrangements are practically done, and our families will never accept anything but our marriage."

Sophia's face fell. Was she so disappointed about marrying him? He could understand her reasons, but it was it truly such a hardship to commit to him?

Richard neglected to give his other reasons for denying Sophia's wish, reasons that bothered him enough to keep him awake at night. His feelings for the woman were growing, and he had no notion of how to stop them.

Chapter 17

Some Days Later

Would yawning be considered rude? Probably, but Sophia was exhausted with all the wedding talks. What did their mothers need to discuss that they hadn't talked about before? They had arranged more meetings than Sophia cared to recall, and every one of them had been about the wedding. How much tea had she drunk since the talk had begun?

I must have averaged three a meeting, and we have had at least seven long afternoons.

Was it any wonder that she was tired? Sitting between Elizabeth and Richard didn't make it any easier. It was anyone's guess how she wound up sitting between them when Sophia had done everything she could to avoid that. It was better for Richard to sit next to Elizabeth than have her sister stare daggers at her, but the insufferable man had pointedly placed Sophia between them.

Richard seemed unwilling to sit next to the beauty, puzzling Sophia. Common sense told her that any man would wish to be near Elizabeth, but Richard wasn't making any sense. Was his behaviour out of respect to her as his fiancée?

“What a marvellous phaeton you have, Richard,” Elizabeth simpered. “When did you purchase it? I would love to ride in it one day.”

“Two days ago,” Richard replied. “I hoped Sophia would christen it with me one of these days.”

Sophia turned sharply to her fiancé, annoyed that he had plunged her back into their conversation. She had tried hard to keep out of it by pretending to not know what they were talking about, but Richard kept throwing her back in again.

“But Sophia isn't the sort to go riding around on such contraptions,” Elizabeth argued. “She hates speed.”

Richard startled them when he laughed. “Hates speed? Have you seen your sister run? She would beat most men I know.”

Heat travelled up Sophia's neck and poured into her face. He was talking about the night she ran away from him, wasn't he? The night of the kiss.

“What is wrong with you?” Elizabeth asked her. “You've gone all red.”

Where was her fan when she needed it? “I'm just feeling a tad warm.”

“But 'tis not a hot day,” the her sister said. “I even brought my coat with me. One does not expect such a cool day in summer, but there you go.”

Sophia set her tea aside—it wasn't doing her much good, anyway. What she needed was something cold like ice cream or a ginger beer.

Even a cold cloth would do!

"The human body is a complex system," said Richard. "It doesn't always follow the rules. Perhaps Sophia has had a sudden hike in temperature to keep her body used to the typically hot summer days."

That both logical and nonsensical; Sophia was quite confident that one's body did not do that, but it could just as well be possible.

A quick glance at her sister almost made her laugh. Elizabeth appeared confused and wasn't hiding it very well. The woman was not an academic, and most concepts tended to fly over her head if they didn't fall into her preferred categories of beauty, music, dancing, and suitors.

"Sophia, dear," the Duchess called. "We would like your input regarding your honeymoon. Would you prefer to remain in England or go abroad?"

Well, that didn't help her high temperature. If anything, it turned her cheeks redder until Sophia was quite sure she looked like a tomato.

"Why, Sophia!" her mother exclaimed. "You're flushed! Are you feeling ill?"

"Richard says it has something to do with adapting to the summer heat, Mama," Elizabeth piped in. "Sophia is feeling hot because it's a cool day."

That sounded utterly ridiculous. Sophia's mother and the Duchess both wore similar expressions that tickled her insides and threatened to spill out of her mouth.

“Is that normal?” the Duchess asked.

"It's a hypothesis, Mother," said Richard. "It could be perfectly normal or complete balderdash. We just need a scientist to prove or disprove the idea."

A giggle escaped Sophia's lips, but she quickly covered it up with a cough. This was not the right time to find anything amusing, not when no one else seemed to understand that Richard was pulling their legs. Sophia had eventually figured it out when she had seen the gleam in his eyes as he had spoken to his mother.

“Oh, dear,” her mother said. “You're coming down with a cold, Sophia. We must get you home and into bed. We cannot afford to have you sick one week before your wedding.”

Sophia inwardly groaned. Did her mother need to remind her of that? It was all Sophia could do not to run screaming for the hills and become a hermit in an abandoned little cottage.

“I assure you that I am well, Mama,” said Sophia. “’Tis but a tickle in my throat. It has already passed.”

Elizabeth, undoubtedly annoyed by all the attention Sophia was receiving, gave a little yelp of pain. Everyone turned to her, which

was precisely what the young woman wanted.

“What is it, dear?” their mother asked.

"Oh, 'tis nothing, Mama," Elizabeth replied, smiling bravely. "I hurt my ankle this morning, and it has just reminded me."

When had she hurt her ankle? Sophia was confident she would have known about it. Elizabeth was a vocal woman when it came to such things, often reacting above the injury. Sophia had often sat by her sister's bed and read her stories, or dabbed her brow with a damp cloth, or even fed her. It hadn't been necessary most of the time, but Sophia had done it out of love.

Perhaps doing so has caused her to become spoilt and unfeeling towards me. I still cannot understand how she can believe that I would purposefully take Richard from her. She knew that I was ready to live a life of spinsterhood. I had no designs to get married to anyone.

“You should put your foot up, dear,” the Duchess suggested. “Richard, please give Elizabeth the footstool by your leg.”

Richard didn't bother standing up but used his foot to push it towards Elizabeth. “There,” he said, sitting back in his seat. “That should help you.”

“Th-thank you,” Elizabeth stammered, frowning.

She arranged the stool under her left leg, taking care to appear more graceful than needed. Elizabeth's head was down, but the woman was definitely aware that everyone was watching her. She wouldn't usually go to this much trouble to put a foot on a stool, giving a few winces for good measure.

After Elizabeth's fourth quiet cry of pain, Sophia decided to intervene. Her sister would make her lie obvious if she didn't stop her unnecessary behaviour. She didn't want the younger woman to be embarrassed once everyone realised that she was only acting and that there was no injured ankle.

“Why don't I place an extra cushion under your leg, Lizzy?” Sophia suggested. “Would it be terribly rude of me to use one of your cushions...Mother?”

Sophia had to swallow hard before getting the word out of her mouth. The Duchess wanted her to use it, but it wasn't as simple as that.

The Duchess beamed while Sophia's mother nodded at her encouragingly. Richard was the only one who appeared neutral.

“Of course, my sweet child,” the Duchess said. “Use whatever cushion you wish to help your sister. I commend you for such a lovely daughter, Patricia. I know that I am gaining a wonderful daughter.”

Goodness! All Sophia had done was use the word 'mother,' but onewould think she had saved a child from a burning house.

“My Sophia is the best,” her mother proclaimed. “What she lacks in

beauty she has more than made up for in courage, intelligence, and kindness.”

Sophia's head dipped, hiding the hurt in her eyes. Yes, she was ugly and all that, but she didn't need to be reminded of it. Her mother had meant to give a compliment, but it had been mixed with criticism and had cancelled out the good.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, Patricia,” the Duchess countered. “And I think Sophia is lovely. Perhaps she is the true beauty and all else is just an imitation.”

Hot tears pricked the back of her eyes, but Sophia cautioned herself not to cry. No one had ever said such things to her, and while Sophia didn't think the Duchess meant it, the words were still kind.

“Yes, perhaps you are right,” Sophia's mother replied uncertainly. “My daughter is... unique.”

Sophia carefully avoided her sister's eyes as she arranged the younger woman's foot on the cushion. Elizabeth would be seething and direct all of her anger at her when it truly wasn't Sophia's fault.

Just like kissing Richard had not been my fault, or getting engaged. Nothing has been my fault, but only a few know this. Now that her plan has backfired and the attention is back on me, Lizzy will surely hate me more.

Sophia briefly glanced at Richard, who was staring so intensely at her that she almost had a misstep as she moved away from her sister. She managed to regain her balance before her blunder was noticeable and

kept her head down to avoid more accidents.

“What were we talking about?” the Duchess asked once Sophia was back in her seat.

“The honeymoon,” her mother replied. “We wanted to know what destination Sophia would prefer.”

Sophia found everyone's focus on her again. “Uh, I'm not entirely certain about that. Perhaps Richard might have an idea.”

Sophia wanted to take that back as soon as she had said it. Why involve him? Why? It was embarrassing enough to talk about it, especially when she had not thought that far ahead. Sophia had hoped to have a solution to her predicament by now, but with one week until she became the new Countess of Brittingham, she was out of ideas.

“What do you think, son?” the Duchess asked. “This is as much your honeymoon as it is Sophia's.”

Richard shrugged. “Perhaps Brighton? We could spend the end of summer at the beach.”

The Duchess clapped her hands excitedly. “Oh! What a wonderful idea. Why did I not think of that? Brighton is lovely at this time of year, and we have a house that will be just perfect for you.”

Brighton? Sophia had never been there before, but she had heard

many good things about the seaside town.

Closing her eyes, Sophia imagined the sound of crashing waves, squawking seagulls, the chitter-chatter of mothers watching over their children, and even the feel of sand between her toes and water swirling around her ankles. It seemed perfect.

“Brighton is one of my favourite places!” Elizabeth commented. “I would love to go there one day.”

And like that, Sophia's idyllic and peaceful image shattered. It should be her sister going on the honeymoon to Brighton, not her. She had stolen Elizabeth's happiness, but Sophia had never meant to.

A heavy lump sat in her throat as she stared at her lap, too ashamed to even look in her sister's direction. What she would do or give to rewrite the past! Did Richard feel any remorse? Did he indeed understand what this was costing Elizabeth? Sophia was no better off, but her main worry was and always would be her sister.

“Mother, Mrs Emley, would you mind if I stole Sophia away from you for a moment or two?” Richard asked. “I have something special I would like to show her.”

Something special? Sophia met his eyes, raising her eyebrow at him, but he merely smiled.

“Of course, Richard,” her mother said. “You will be married soon, and you should take every opportunity to be in each other's presence and get to know each other. Do you not think so, Diane?”

“I wholly agree, my dear Patricia,” the Duchess agreed. “Go with our blessings.”

The Duchess waved them off with a cheeky smile, coaxing a pink stain from Sophia's cheeks. She didn't bother ignoring Richard's arm but took it and steered him outside herself. He laughed when they were some feet away from the parlour, halting their steps.

“Just a minute, Sophia,” he said. “Why the hurry?”

Sophia let go of his arm, taking a step back. “I have had just about all I can take of everything, Richard. I do not think I can handle all of this...” She waved her hands around as she tried to look for a suitable word. “Drama! All this drama! My life was simple before you mistook me for my sister and, and... you know what!”

Elizabeth's eyes had been a heavy weight on Sophia's back as she had walked out, and despite being away from her sister, Sophia could still feel them.

“Calm down,” Richard soothed. “I understand this is a lot to process, but nothing good will come of fretting. Take several deep breaths.”

Richard unnecessarily showed her how, his cheeks puffing up and his mouth making a trout face as he blew out the air. It was rather amusing, and Sophia found herself smiling.

“Do you do this in public?” she asked.

“No. Why?”

“Just asking. I'm calm now. What did you wish to show me?”

They might as well make the best of their walk, because it wouldn't matter either way to Elizabeth. The woman was ready to believe the worst about Sophia.

"It's a secret spot on the property that only our gardener and I know about. He helped me conceal it several years ago, and ever since then, I go there when I wish to be alone, or when stressed."

And he wanted to show it to her? Why? “Isn't it too private to reveal to me?”

“You're going to be my wife soon,” he said. “Why not share the space with you?”

He said it so matter-of-factly, but Sophia marvelled at his readiness to give her a bit of his life that no one else but he and the gardener knew. Perhaps it wasn't a great matter to Richard, but it was to her.

"I'd love to see it," she said and meant it.

Richard grinned and held out his arm, pinning her hand in place as soon as her hand touched his sleeve. Sophia flexed her fingers as tingles started in the tips and inched their way up her arm. She still couldn't understand what this odd feeling was. It was usually accompanied by the sense of fluttering butterflies in her belly, but today she couldn't feel...oh, no—there it was. Sophia laid a hand on her stomach and sucked in her breath, hoping to trap the movement.

“Is something wrong?” Richard asked.

Sophia wasn't entirely certain, but her instincts dictated that she shouldn't share what she was feeling.

“Nothing at all. Shall we go?”

Richard peered into her eyes for several heartbeats as though he were searching for something. Did he perhaps not believe her?

“Yes, we can go,” he finally said. “It's a stretch from the house.”

“I could do with some exercise after sitting for over an hour,” she admitted. “I'm not one to remain stationary for too long.”

“I like that about you. Too many women are far too indolent to step outside their houses unless it's to be seen. Why not do something because it is good for you?”

Sophia bit her lower lip and lowered her eyes. He liked that about

her? It was an odd thing to like, but she was pleased nevertheless.

Richard took her on a stone footpath past the garden and towards the woods, or at least that was what she thought until he turned left and headed to what looked like overgrown bushes. What could he have here? It was merely bush!

Richard stopped in front of hanging vines and turned to her. "We're here," he said, sounding excited.

Goodness! Where was here? "This place?" she asked.

"More so what's behind it." Richard reached into his pocket and pulled out a large ornate key, handing it to her. "Would you do the honours?"

"Tis either I am blind, or he has lost his mind. What on earth am I supposed to do with this key? Unlock a tree?"

Sophia took it anyway, offering him a bemused smile. "Is it a souvenir of some sort?"

Richard laughed and pushed back the vines, revealing an ancient-looking door. "No. It unlocks this door."

Sophia was both relieved and excited. "A secret door? What does it open to?"

"Unlock, and you will see."

She didn't have to be told twice. Richard stepped aside, still holding the vines back as Sophia opened the door. The key turned smoothly in its lock, indicating it was regularly serviced. It was probably the gardener. The door was a tad heavy, forcing Sophia to give a little grunt of effort as she pushed it to reveal a scene on the other side that caught her breath and captivated her mind within seconds of seeing it.

"How...magical," she breathed.

It was a secret garden, but unlike any garden Sophia had ever seen before. Everything was green except for the flowers that grew, brightening the area with their many colours. A walkway just ahead led to a large pond which likely teemed with fish and where ducks paddled along. Birds filled the trees, and other little creatures scurried past as they climbed trees or hid in their burrows.

"Do you like it?" Richard asked.

"I do not think like is the word. This is magnificent, Richard. This must have been what the Garden of Eden looked like, or at least, close to the famed garden. Are those fruit trees up ahead?"

He nodded. "Apricots, plums, pears, apples, mulberries, cherries...I cannot recall what else I have. There's even a vegetable patch, but it's mainly the gardener's little bit of land. This is where he grows his gargantuan melons, pumpkins, butternuts and other vegetables that he sells at the fair."

It was all fantastic, and worth the walk from the house. Sophia so wanted to explore the place, but where could she start? She doubted she could tour the entire area in one day.

"May I suggest we sit in the gazebo?" said Richard. "Or perhaps the treehouse, although I do not know how sturdy it is now. I haven't been in it for years, although I should probably reinforce it for our children's safety."

Sophia's eyes looked anywhere but at Richard as her mind contended with what he had said. Children? He was thinking farther ahead than she was! That was a good thing, wasn't it? He could just be saying it to—

"Sophia?"

"Yes?"

"Would you like to sit down?"

He had asked that already, hadn't he? And she hadn't answered. Sophia wanted to palm her face but merely nodded.

"Yes. Sitting sounds nice."

Sitting sounds nice? Someone needed to come and get her before she

said anything else that sounded like she had cotton for brains.

Richard didn't hold out his arm this time, but he remained close to her as they took a slow walk to the gazebo, sometimes lightly bumping into her. Sophia kept telling herself that she didn't mind, but her nerves were stretched so tight that a violinist could have drawn his bow over her.

She finally put a little distance between them when they sat down and gazed over the pond.

"How many fish are in there?" she asked.

"I started with six several years ago, but now there are so many that the gardener fishes for his dinner at least once a week."

"A person could comfortably live here and not need anything else. Well, except for clothes. Unless one can go as bare as the day he was born, but I imagine that would cause problems during the colder months. You could kill a few furry creatures and use their pelt for clothing, but that seems terrible. Imagine killing a few squirrels for a dress? The stench might become a tad too much to handle, but..." Sophia's words trailed as she turned to Richard and encountered his amused expression. "What is it?"

"You. I'm not used to you being so talkative."

Sophia's shoulders dropped. "I'll talk less."

“No! I like it when you talk a lot. Believe it or not, but I find it soothing.”

“Soothing?” she repeated. “No one has ever said that before. How can chatter be soothing?”

Richard lifted one shoulder and let it fall. “I do not know—it simply is. I always took you for the silent type, but now I realise I was the one at fault. How can you talk to a person who doesn't acknowledge that you have much to say?”

That was true, but it was surprising to hear it from Richard. “Sometimes I have too much to say,” she admitted, “and drive my family up the wall, but I must say that my silences in social situations have afforded me insight into the lives of others. I'm a keen observer of humans.”

“Indeed? Have I ever been one of your subjects?”

“Briefly,” Sophia admitted.

“Am I not interesting enough to hold your attention?”

“You sound affronted,” she told him.

“A little. Perhaps I have thought of myself as too important and expected everyone to think so as well. You are the only one to have

ever put me in my place.”

That seemed about right. Richard had been spoilt by the adoration of the people in his life, and she doubted anyone had scolded or rejected him. Perhaps his parents had taken him to task here and there, but his life had certainly been one of privilege. Beauty and wealth tended to do that to a person.

“Do you resent me for it?” she asked.

“No,” he said without hesitation. “Perhaps at first, but I now find it refreshing.”

That was the last thing Sophia had expected him to say, but she didn't question it. Richard wasn't a liar, and while she didn't entirely trust him yet, he was a man of his word.

They continued to speak into the late afternoon, but eventually, it was time to return to the house. Sophia was reluctant to leave this little world and wished to remain speaking with Richard, but everyone had to be wondering where they were.

Richard helped her out of her seat and curled her arm into his. Despite the flurry of movement in her belly, Sophia felt at peace beside him, allowing herself to lean in slightly.

For better or worse, there was no denying the feelings growing within her, feelings she had no business experiencing. But, oh, how wonderful would it be to have this man as her husband and live a life filled with days like this?

But he is not yours.

Chapter 18

No one should be allowed to get up at an unearthly hour, but no one had made Richard do it. His eyes had simply popped open at half past three in the morning, and then he was fully awake with nothing to do but stare at the ceiling.

It was almost pitch black outside, a perfect night for stargazing. Would Sophia get out of bed and take advantage of the dead hour? Probably. She didn't appear to be a woman who sat around waiting for anything or anyone.

Richard pushed himself out of bed and dragged his bed sheet with him. Should he go outside and stargaze, or sit at his window? It would be more comfortable sitting in his own room, but the full effect of the sky would be lost.

“Outside it is.”

Richard had his own set of keys to most doors in the house, but Cavendish boasted every key to every lock in the building—big or small. The butler prided himself on having the responsibility rest solely on his shoulders and rarely let anyone handle the clanky lot.

Richard got as far as his bedroom door when he turned back, threw the sheet back on the bed and wore his dressing gown instead. It just made more sense and would keep him warmer should there be a chill in the air.

Slipping his feet into bedroom slippers, Richard belted his gown a little more tightly and left his room, taking care to walk with thought to those who were still sleeping. His bedroom was far from his parents, but the quiet of early mornings could make even a pin drop sound like a boulder falling out of the sky.

The servants would likely wake up in an hour to prepare breakfast and get the house moving for the day; his parents would sleep until at least eight o'clock before having their first cup of tea in bed, and finally making their way to the breakfast room around nine.

Richard preferred his breakfast earlier or much later but never in between. Nine o'clock meals tended to make him feel sluggish to start his day, but a seven o'clock breakfast gave him the drive to tackle his day ahead. Not that there was much tackling to be done—the life of an earl was not that of a servant, a truth Richard did not take for granted.

His life was filled with social events or leisure activities where he would simply do as he pleased until he grew bored. It was all rather mundane if he truly thought about it, but he hadn't known any other way of life.

"I'll bet Sophia will show me a different way," he said to himself with a little smile.

The woman likely had busier days and a project of some sort to complete. Sophia enjoyed painting and struck him as the type of woman to have several artworks in various forms of completion. His mother had commissioned the young woman to paint her beloved dogs, but Richard didn't think that project had started yet. Everyone was too concerned about the wedding arrangements to think about a dog painting.

Richard paused at the front door, cursing himself when he couldn't find the key. It was no use looking for it in the dark! He moved towards a wall sconce and went through every key until a familiar one gave him relief.

“Finally!” he muttered, moving back to the door and slotting the key in.

It turned with a slight creaking noise, but it might as well have been a trumpet blast. Pausing, Richard looked around him and listened for movement. Stargazing at four in the morning didn't seem like something his parents or the servants would understand, but perhaps if he told them that he wanted to see a sunrise, they might see the merit in it.

When last had he witnessed one of those? Years, maybe. Richard had lost the awe he used to have for such things, but now it seemed to be coming back to him. Everything just looked fresher, newer, and more exciting. The world had woken up again, or was that just him?

As he stepped outside, Richard was met with insects communicating with each other and birds chirping. It suddenly seemed wrong to describe the early morning as the dead of night when it was alive with life. Some animals were nocturnal, weren't they?

By the time Richard had found a spot to sit on the dewy grass (he should have taken that sheet after all!), light had crept into the night sky and bathed it in a shade of blue with grey tinges. Some stars were still visible, but full constellations were harder to see. Oh well, a sunrise it was. It could be a conversation starter when he next saw Sophia, but it wouldn't end there.

Sophia was full of thoughts and ideas that intrigued Richard and kept his interest far longer than other women would have. Usually, he would spend time using his charms to enthrall a lady and have her act coy in return. However, with Sophia, it was different. There was no need for charm, coyness, or any other game Richard was accustomed to. She was like talking to Nicholas, only in female form and more interesting.

Lying down, Richard rested his head on his linked hands. His gown and bedclothes would likely be soaked through by the time he stood up, but it would be worth it. He laughed at himself, astonished by how differently he felt. Perhaps he was more surprised that he had taken Sophia to his secret spot that most people were unaware of. Nicholas knew of it, but he had never been to the escape. Richard wasn't keen to call it a garden because it was more than that, and jungle didn't fit it either, although he had used the word as a young boy.

"Perhaps I shall ask Sophia to give it a name," he thought aloud.

Her reaction had been everything he had expected and more, and while Richard wasn't quite sure why he took her there, he didn't regret it. It might have to do with the crestfallen expression he had seen when Elizabeth insisted on drawing attention to herself. That was all the woman had done throughout the afternoon. Thank goodness he and Sophia were able to get away for some time, or he might have snapped and said something he would later regret.

Elizabeth was no longer the woman Richard frequently thought about. She was still beautiful and charming, but he wanted more. Shallow conversations no longer interested him, not after spending time in Sophia's presence. She wasn't concerned with the next social outing, the ton's gossip, fashion, or even marriage and tended to avoid the topic altogether if she could help it.

“How on earth did I get through long afternoons and evenings with mundane chatter?” he asked himself.

He had to have been just as dull to find amusement in them, which said a lot for the company he kept.

A pinkish, orange glow stole over the sky, driving the grey-blue away. Just a sliver of the lightest blue separated the oncoming sunrise from the receding night sky, as though the colours were too afraid of mixing together. It was a spectacular sight. A quiet peace filled him as the sun peeked its head over the horizon, spreading its warmth to the world below.

The serenity Richard felt had little to do with the sun, and much to do with Sophia. He was no longer doubtful about his marriage to her now that he had some assurance that it wouldn't be the terrible mess he had initially believed.

The woman brought something into his life that Richard hadn't been aware was missing until the differences were too obvious to ignore. Sophia's calming presence had provided him with the opportunity to simply be himself, to be the person who wasn't constantly concerned that people were watching his every move.

Frowning, Richard shifted to a sitting position and drew his knees up. Since when had Sophia come to mean more to him than just the woman he was forced to marry and had to get along with? She was the one who now invaded his every thought and not her sister.

“But she's not my type,” he argued aloud.

The woman would not be able to survive a moment in the company of his usual acquaintances, and she was no more comely than she had been before they became an engaged couple. What had changed? The only difference was that he had come to know her better and enjoyed being around her. Surprisingly, Sophia wasn't as unattractive as Richard had believed, but he couldn't see any real change in her features. The conflicting thoughts left him stumped. How could someone be prettier, but not be pretty?

“I must be losing my mind,” he muttered.

However, something his mother had said the other day came to mind. The Duchess had spoken about Sophia's inner beauty and finding that to be true beauty. He hadn't agreed with her, but perhaps he had been too hasty in disregarding the matter. Elizabeth was beautiful, but her attitude was starting to repel him. Sophia was plain, yet she was also lovely to him. Could that be her inner beauty that he could see shining out of her?

If Richard had to choose which beauty he preferred, which one would he pick? The question left him stumped. He was accustomed to having his pick of gorgeous women and never thought he would marry someone no one else wanted. While he now disagreed with most of society's opinion of Sophia, he did agree that she was as undesirable as they come.

“But she isn't,” he said with a frustrated growl. “Not really.”

Richard couldn't ignore that he saw beauty in Sophia, but not with his physical eyes. A battle of the senses left him confused and in need of

an objective opinion. Speaking to his parents was out of the question, which left Nicholas—the man knew more about Richard's situation than anyone else and wasn't prejudiced against Sophia. Perhaps he would have the right advice.

Richard waited for the sun to fully break over the horizon before going back inside and startling the servants. He had a little chuckle as he got ready for the day and had a simple breakfast of toast and preserves with coffee.

“Are you going out this morning, my lord?” Cavendish asked.

“Yes. Why?”

"Only that I might ready your horse for you, my lord. This may be one of the few times I get to do so before you are married and have your own butler."

The butler looked so morose that Richard had to laugh as he clapped the man on his shoulder.

“I'm not going anywhere, Cavendish. At least, not yet. Sophia and I will go on honeymoon for three or four months, and we'll come back home. By then, you'll be in the countryside with Mother and Father. I do not plan to start my own household until my bride is ready to do so. She might need a little more time before taking on her countess duties.”

The man's shoulders sagged with relief. “That's good to hear, my lord. I'll just ready that horse for you.”

Richard kept his eyes on the man until he disappeared, surprised by the butler's display of emotion. He never thought that Cavendish had much affection for him beyond that of a servant and master, but he was clearly wrong.

“Perhaps I should open my eyes more and take a look around me,” he advised himself.

* * *

Richard arrived at Nicholas's house a little after ten and caught the man at his breakfast.

“I’ve never known you to eat so late,” he commented, taking a seat.

Nicholas dipped a piece of toast in his runny egg, swirling it around before popping it into his mouth.

“I had a late night,” the man replied, his mouth full.

“You could have just answered me before you put that piece in your mouth,” Richard complained.

“Where would the fun be? Anyway, I know you are not here to go on about my breakfast habits. What has happened this time?”

“Can a man not come and see his best friend without there being a specific reason?”

“Yes,” Nicholas agreed. “But that's not the case with you. What is it this time? Your parents? Sophia? Elizabeth? Or perhaps your wedding that is mere days away?”

Richard's stomach clenched at the thought. He was no longer resistant to marriage, but it still gave him a bit of anxiety. It was a big step, after all. One minute he would be a single man, and the next, a married man. It was no wonder that marriage terrified some people.

“I am conflicted,” Richard admitted. “But I did plan to see you this week for a last hoorah before I became a married man.”

Nicholas lifted an eyebrow and put his utensils down. “Hoorah? What would this hoorah entail? I hope nothing too drastic. I have heard of some men who wreak havoc before marrying their brides. If that is your intention, then I must inform you that I will not support you.”

“You're jumping ahead of yourself, Nick. I only meant a little brandy and reminiscing about my single years. I have no intention of sowing my oats before my wedding. Sophia deserves better than that.”

Nicholas nodded, this time buttering a piece of toast. “Good. What are you conflicted about?”

“This might sound ridiculous to you, but it's rather important to me,” Richard began. “Now, do not laugh at me when I say this.”

“That is a sure way of getting me to laugh.”

“Nicholas.”

The man sighed. “Oh, very well. I'll contain my mirth for the time being, but if the matter truly is amusing, then I must laugh.”

Richard was reluctant to share anything now, but his head would likely explode if he didn't. He took a deep breath and explained his predicament in one go:

"I fear my feelings for Sophia are growing, but my mind still tells me that she is not my typical woman. She is painfully plain in appearance and would not survive ten minutes with our acquaintances; however, I can sit and listen to her all day and quite gladly give up the mindless conversations that revolve around the same things when with our other friends."

Nicholas sat back in his chair, his head tilted back as he gave Richard a searching look. “Do you think you have fallen in love with Sophia?”

“Heavens, no!” Richard immediately denied. “This has nothing to do with love. I simply like Sophia more than I liked her before.”

“That's a good thing, isn't it?”

Richard wasn't explaining himself very well, was he? "That's not the point. Part of me is affronted that I would like someone like Sophia or see any beauty in her, while the other part of me welcomes the change wholeheartedly. I even prefer her company to Elizabeth."

"Again, that's a good thing, isn't it?" Nicholas insisted. "You are making a mountain out of a molehill, Richard. If you believe Sophia to be good and beautiful, then let it be so. She will be your wife in a matter of days, and it'll make the transition from single to married easier. Do not question a good thing so much."

Richard sighed. "I suppose you're right, but 'tis not as easy as you think."

"It could be if you stopped worrying about what society thinks."

"I'm not worrying about what others think," Richard said.

"Indeed? From where I am sitting, it seems you are doing just that."

Nicholas resumed eating, offering him some toast and tea, which Richard declined. He couldn't eat right now, not with his stomach in a knot.

What am I actually afraid of? What others will think of me once I marry Sophia? Most people do not expect me to, but I want to.

“My problems aside, has anything significant happened to you?” Richard asked. “I have not seen you in some days.”

“Actually, yes,” Nicholas admitted with a grin.

“Do tell. You seem pleased about it.”

“This may come as a shock to you, but seeing your changed behaviour, I know you will not protest my decision.”

This seemed serious. “What is it?”

“I’m interested in courting Miss Rose Pilkington.”

Richard’s jaw dropped. “Rose? Sophia’s best friend.”

Nicholas nodded slowly. “Yes. I like her and find her refreshingly different.”

That was what Richard had said about Sophia. “Well!” said Richard, giving a shrug. “I suppose I should congratulate you on coming out of your self-induced loveless state. Any friend of Sophia’s is a good enough person for me.”

Nicholas grinned, reaching over to clap Richard on the shoulder. "I was hoping my best friend would say something like that. Isn't it odd that we're both interested in women we would have never looked twice at?"

It wasn't just odd, but amazing considering their usual preference. Someone had once passed a comment that a man could only be happy if he married a plain woman because she would remain by his side for all time. A beautiful wife would come with stress and was usually high maintenance.

How would his life be with Elizabeth as his wife? The woman was lovely, but her disposition grated on his nerves. On the other hand, Sophia held the promise of a fulfilling life.

Perhaps there is some truth to that after all.

Chapter 19

Sophia stood back, regarding her work. The background needed a little more green and a bit of shading to make it look realistic. Would Richard guess what it was just by looking at it?

The painting featured the pond, the ducks, a fish leaping out of the water, and the surrounding greenery and blooms. It was a scene from the viewpoint of the gazebo, one that was imprinted on her mind forever. Sophia would never forget that wonderful afternoon and often caught herself thinking about it.

“A little more white on the fish, I think,” she decided. “It blends in with the pond too much.”

Sophia hadn't seen any fish that day, but she could guess what sort they were. The ducks were well-represented in various stages of sitting and taking to the sky, and if one looked closely enough, they would notice little creatures hiding behind bushes, peeking their heads out of trees, and insects crawling across leaves.

However, the most important part of the painting were the two hands that lay inches apart on a table. One was noticeably female, and the other male. The hands were not touching, but Sophia had managed to convey the emotion showing how the couple were holding themselves back. This wasn't a painting she could readily show her parents, especially when the woman's hand was bare.

Sophia peered a bit closer, pleased at the dwindling restraint she had managed to paint into the pale limbs. The tips of the couple's shoes were showing as well, confirming to the onlooker that there was

indeed a man and woman. Sophia had still to give it a fitting name, but perhaps she should wait until she had completed the painting. It was nearly done, but the last finishing touches would take it from lovely to awe-inspiring.

“This could be my wedding gift to him,” she considered aloud. “But I might be too embarrassed to give it to him.”

Sophia didn't want Richard to assume that she was in love with him or anything, although she couldn't deny that she had some feelings for him. He was the reason why she couldn't get this ridiculous smile off her face. While she may not love him just yet, Sophia certainly cared about Richard and no longer had any misgivings about marrying him. If he could so easily talk about the future, why not embrace married life and be happy?

“Sophia?”

Pausing her next brushstroke, Sophia put down her palette and paintbrush and opened the door to find her mother walking down the hallway.

“Mama! I'm here,” she called.

The woman turned around, her dress curling about her legs as she moved towards Sophia.

“There you are, dear,” she said. “I've been looking for you all over the house but didn't think to look in here. Have you been painting all morning? You certainly look it.”

Sophia's mother wet a finger and swiped it across her cheek, pulling back to reveal a yellow paint smudge.

"I must have wiped my face with a dirty hand," Sophia surmised. "Did you need me for something?"

"Your last dress fitting, dear. Did you forget?"

"Yes, Mama," Sophia admitted. "I was caught up in painting."

"I see that. Go wash up and meet me in the downstairs parlour in five minutes. The wedding is in less than five days, and there is still so much to do!"

Her mother left after Sophia promised that she would not dally any longer. The entire household had not stopped bustling about since yesterday when everyone seemed to realise that the wedding was just a few days away.

Sophia's mother kept changing the menu for the wedding breakfast, the servants were cleaning everything from top to bottom, and her father had not stopped shelling out money. It was far too chaotic for Sophia, so she had taken to slipping away at the first opportunity and usually ended up reading or painting.

After a quick wash of her face and hands, Sophia hurried downstairs only to nearly run smack into her sister.

“Oh! I'm so sorry, Lizzy. I didn't see you there.”

“No one sees me anymore,” the young woman complained. “And it's all your fault.”

Sophia didn't have any time for this today. Elizabeth was always throwing accusations at her and blaming Sophia for everything that was wrong with her life. That was hardly fair considering Sophia had always been the one to ensure her sister's happiness, but the younger woman had been largely forgotten since the household had begun preparing for the wedding.

Nothing I can say will make it any better. She has determined in her heart to hate me no matter what.

“I'm sorry, Lizzy, but I have to go.”

Sophia brushed past her sister, smiling apologetically. As expected, Elizabeth maintained her seething stare.

“Go off and wear the dress that should have been mine; marry the man that should have been mine; and live the life that should have been mine. In fact, you should take my very life to add to yours. Perhaps you'll live forever so you can take further advantage of what rightfully belongs to me.”

Sophia said nothing but hurried away, keeping her head down. Her

sister's comments stung, but lately, they had lost much of their bite. Perhaps it had to do with knowing that Richard did not hate her as many others did, and she might just have a husband who wished to be with her.

Sophia entered the parlour with a smile to greet the seamstress, who commented on how radiant she looked.

"It must be love," the woman gushed. "I recall when I married my sweet Ernest. I do not think I stopped smiling for weeks after our wedding, and even now, he makes me laugh."

"Sophia has made a good match," Sophia's mother commented. "Any woman in her place would be delighted. Now, let's make sure this dress fits perfectly. I do not want a seam out of place."

Sophia went behind the screen and stripped down to her sheer underthings, no longer embarrassed that one could see so much of her. She had been through so many dress fittings that it didn't bother her as it used to.

It took nearly half an hour before her mother was satisfied with the dress, and the seamstress could go with the promise of having the final dress back in two days.

"Mama, do you think I could invite Rose for tea tomorrow?" Sophia asked, adjusting her dress as she came around the screen. "I have not seen her in some time."

"As long as your tea does not interfere with our arrangements, I do

not see why not.”

Sophia thanked her and sat at the writing desk to pen a short note to her best friend. She had so much to tell the woman that writing a letter just wouldn't do—Sophia needed several hours to explain all that had happened and how she was feeling.

Her mother left the room spouting about a headache and the need to lie down. Sophia promised to take a cold compress for her brow as soon as she had sent a footman with her note, so when she heard footsteps coming back into the room, she assumed her mother had decided not to go to bed after all.

“Mama,” Sophia began, turning to the doorway. It was Elizabeth instead. “Oh! I thought you were Mama.”

Her sister said nothing. She took a seat, placed a cushion upon her lap, leaned into it, and stared at Sophia.

“Lizzy, is something the matter?”

“No. Everything is just perfect. For you, that is—I'm as miserable as can be.”

“I'm sorry to hear that.”

“You do not look it,” her sister argued. “Your head has been stuck in the clouds since we came back from tea with Richard and his mother.

Why? Why are you suddenly so happy? You were moping about the house not so long ago."

Elizabeth was right, for Sophia had been rather dreary for some time, but all of that had changed. Should she reveal to her sister how she felt? Perhaps a little bit.

"Things have changed between Richard and me, Lizzy. I used to see him as a spoilt and shallow man, but now he has shown me a different side to him. He is kind, thoughtful, and willing to go through this marriage to save my reputation. That has given me a little hope for the future."

Elizabeth's jaw visibly clenched and unclenched as her eyes glowered with restrained anger. Sophia pushed further into her chair, not entirely certain of what her sister would do. The younger woman had had a scattering of rages before, and Sophia had always been the one to calm her down. What would happen now that she was the cause behind Elizabeth's latest rampage?

"Richard has always been so kind and sweet, Saffi," the woman said, her voice lighter than Sophia expected. "He is a lovely man, which is why I fell in love with him."

Sophia kept her silence. What could she say? What her sister said was true enough, but she could have argued that Richard had not necessarily been so kind and thoughtful towards her before.

"Do you think Richard feels the same way about you?" Elizabeth asked.

“What do you mean?”

"Does he think you're wonderful and worthy of his time? He may be willing to marry you, but it doesn't mean that he'll be happy with you. You tricked him, after all, and he is honourable enough to help you keep your reputation. My Richard is a selfless man and will always do the right thing even if it pains him."

Sophia gnawed on her lower lip, crushing the note in her hands. Elizabeth knew precisely how to cut a person down and seemed to relish doing it. Was this the sister she had watched grow up for nineteen years? The woman she had loved and cherished more than anything else?

Where did I go wrong with her? I don't even know what to say!

She didn't have to say a word, however, because Elizabeth charged forth with whatever was on her chest.

“Do you know how miserable I will be once you marry the man I love?” she asked. “But I am not the one you should be worrying about. You will be a hundred times more miserable than me, a wretched soul for the rest of your life. Do you know why?”

“Why?” Sophia asked, her voice small.

“Because you will marry a man who will never love you. Richard loves me, and he will always love me! You will forever have to look into his eyes and see the lack of love in them. Will you be happy? Will

you?”

“I do not know,” Sophia replied truthfully. “Why must you trouble me so, Lizzy? None of this is my doing.”

“Liar!” the woman hissed, spittle flying out of her mouth. “Admit that you planned this entire situation.”

“How can I when I didn't? Oh, why won't you believe me?” Sophia cried. “You know me well, Lizzy, or I thought you did. I have always wanted what was best for you, and I would never do anything to hurt you.”

Elizabeth snorted and stood up. “The best for me was Richard, but you are the one who will marry him in just a few days. Why? How could you do this to me?”

The young woman began to pace the room, her hands balled fists at her sides. Elizabeth was so troubled that Sophia wanted to go to her and hug her, but she didn't dare.

“Please, calm down, Lizzy.”

“No! How can I be calm when I have to watch you marry Richard? You should have told our parents that you refuse to marry him and allowed your reputation to be ruined.”

Did her sister mean that? Would her own sister wish to see her ruin? It

hurt to think so.

“Richard will not let me end our engagement,” Sophia said truthfully. “I have already spoken to him and he is determined to get married.”

“That is a lie! Richard would take any way out of this engagement to be with me. Simply go to our parents and tell them that you have changed your mind.”

Sophia shook her head. “It's too late.”

“It's never too late! Call the wedding off right now,” Elizabeth demanded, striding over to Sophia and grabbing her by the shoulders. “Tell our parents, Sophia, please! Call off the wedding for my sake.”

Elizabeth's eyes were crazed, but the tears in them were Sophia's undoing. “Oh, Lizzy...I can't disappoint our parents. What about their reputation?”

The woman dropped her hands in disgust. “I knew you wouldn't sacrifice anything for me, and yet you claim to love me. You're nothing but a liar, Sophia Emley, and I regret that you're my sister.”

And with that, Elizabeth left the room, slamming the door behind her. Sophia slumped forward, covering her eyes with her hands. That had been horrific and had cut to her very soul. Elizabeth had been like a madwoman, showing her mental instability. Had this mess affected her so terribly? Sophia could never have imagined that her beautiful sister could be reduced to the creature who had all but growled in her face.

“She didn't mean it,” Sophia whispered. “She didn't.”

She couldn't just sit by and do nothing while her sister spiralled out of control. What if Elizabeth did something to hurt herself? What then? Sophia would never forgive herself if that happened. Wouldn't it be better to have a ruined reputation and ensure her sister's deserved happiness than to live miserably with a man who would always carry a light in his heart for Elizabeth? The only person standing in the way of her sister and Richard's happiness was Sophia.

What would her parents say if she called off the wedding? They would be understandably angry and embarrassed for a little while, but once Richard and Elizabeth announced their intention to marry, they would put Sophia's scandal behind them. Perhaps they might even send her to a spinster aunt to live out the rest of her days in obscurity.

“I am used to that already,” she said with a choking laugh.

She had been a nobody and nothing before her betrothal to Richard, and she could easily go back to being that person again.

Sophia turned back to the writing desk, frowning when she kicked something on the floor. She bent down, her heart sinking. It was the note she had planned to send to Rose, but there was no use in doing that now. Sophia threw it into the little bin sitting beside the desk and began her next letter before losing her nerve.

Dear Richard,

You are a kind man to have sacrificed your freedom to save my reputation, but I assure you it is no longer necessary. I am thankful that you were willing to go through with this wedding and even sought to convince me that it is the right thing to do. However, we both know that is not true.

You belong with Elizabeth, and I give you my full blessing to seek her hand in marriage once I have announced my decision to my parents tomorrow evening. I will tell them that I refuse to marry you, which should free you from all consequences. Please do not attempt to sway my decision.

We both know this engagement should have never happened, but life has an amusing way of bringing people into each other's lives. Perhaps this was but a lesson we both needed for our future selves—who can know?

I wish you all the happiness in your future.

Yours Sincerely,

Sophia Emley

Sophia had to lean away from the paper by the time she got to her name because her tears were falling thick and fast. She didn't want to call off the wedding; she wanted to get married to Richard and have the sort of life he had inadvertently shown her.

Did I dream that afternoon in his secret garden? Did I misunderstand what he was telling me?

Sophia didn't think so, but Elizabeth's happiness needed to come first. Richard may have been willing to marry her, but his heart belonged to

Elizabeth. Sophia could not live her life and have children with a man who pined away for her sister. It would eventually break her heart and bring misery upon them all. Her parents would simply have to accept her decision.

But can I?

Chapter 20

"These pork chops are divine," the Duke declared, adding another one to his plate.

"That's your fourth one, dear," his wife reproved. "Do you not think you should slow down?"

The Duke narrowed his eyes, keeping his hands on the meat. "What are you trying to say, Diane?"

"Nothing, dear. Only that too much of a good thing is never healthy."

"In that case, perhaps I should lessen the nip money I give you."

Richard's mother's eyes grew so wide that he could see the whites all around. "That is not what I meant. I do not think you give me too much money."

"Are you saying I am stingy?"

Richard groaned, gripping his forehead. His parents could go on for hours like this and then kiss and make up as though nothing had happened. Were all married couples like this, or was this the mark of a couple who loved each other?

Richard's parents had always seemed in love to him, but apparently, that had not always been the case. Theirs was an arranged marriage, and like most marriages that started out in this way, his parents had not known each other well. It was only when he was born that his parents bonded and eventually fell in love. Now, they were inseparable, although they could also drive each other up the wall.

Will Sophia and I end up like them? It's not a terrible fate, but I could do without the daily arguing.

"You're smiling again, son," his mother commented.

"I am?"

His father nodded. "You are. I thought you would be begging us to stop this wedding by now, but you seem at peace with it. Have you reached an understanding with Sophia? She is a good girl, you know. I do not think we could have done any better had we chosen her ourselves."

Richard couldn't deny his father's opinion. "Sophia will be a good wife, Father, of that I am certain. I have no objections to marrying her."

"Do I detect some affection for her?" the Duchess asked. "You always appear softer when you speak about her."

Richard flushed. "Why must you dig so much? You should be happy that I am prepared to marry Sophia without argument or pleading to

save me.”

“Just admit that you like her, son,” his father insisted. “We like her as well. I still find her rather curious, but I like her. I look forward to having a daughter in this family.”

“I am the one who should be happiest about Sophia joining this family,” the Duchess said. “I have been the only woman among two men for twenty-five years now! 'Tis time another woman joined forces with me.”

The Duke groaned. “Do not rope my daughter into one of your hare-brained schemes, my love. I cannot handle much more of them.”

Richard would have laughed, but his mother might not take his reaction lightly. She was touchy about her failed schemes and maintained that one of her ideas would eventually work. Last year, she had bought several hundred swans to draw her carriage instead of horses. She had believed it would look majestic and make her the envy of every woman.

The swans had ended up tipping the carriage over and dropped their faeces all over the contraption. Their poor driver and footman had escaped with a few scratches and swan droppings, but his mother had suffered a mild head injury that had made her scream like a banshee every time she heard a swan's cry.

That was just one incident, but there were many more others that Richard looked forward to sharing with Sophia. She would surely enjoy hearing them.

"You will all eat your hats when I make a success of my dream," the Duchess stated.

"Which dream would this be?" her husband asked. "You have hundreds of them a day. I do not think I have ever met a woman with such a vivid imagination. The good Lord must have given you triple the usual amount."

"I think Sophia will challenge Mother for the most vivid imagination," Richard claimed. "Some even consider her a witch, although that is just nonsense. I suppose she could be a witch if she wanted to, but one of those good ones that live in the forest."

Perhaps Sophia could set up her own little hut in his escape and brew potions, or at least pretend to. She would find it amusing and might use it as a scare tactic for those that annoyed her.

I could truly see her doing that. I shall never have another dull day once I am married to her.

"What backward buffoon would ever think Sophia is a witch?" his mother asked.

"Several people I know," Richard replied. "Some have even suggested that she consulted a gypsy and was given a love potion to capture my heart and marry me."

Richard let that sink in as he scooped up a few carrots and forked the lot into his mouth. He was no longer angry about the rumour—he now

found it amusing. Once a person was able to step back and really look at something that sounded ridiculous, they could see the humour in it.

“I cannot believe anyone would accuse our Sophia of such a despicable thing,” the Duchess said, shaking her head. “She is the last person I would ever expect to do such a thing. People are cruel, and she has had to face them for so long.”

“Some might say that she has used the potion on you as well because you like her so much,” Richard pointed out. “People expect us to behave in ways that they deem acceptable, even when it's clearly wrong. I don't want to be part of that society.”

The Duke slapped his shoulder, startling Richard. “You're growing up, son. It took you long enough, but I'm glad to see Sophia has had a positive influence on you. I can only imagine what good fortune she will bring to you when you finally become man and wife.”

Richard covered his father's hand with his own. “I suppose it was about time. You and Mother have been pestering me about getting married for so long that I was given a wife before I even knew about it. Are you certain you didn't plan this entire thing?”

It would be quite an elaborate scheme if his parents turned out to be the ones who planned the mistaken identity kiss and spread the rumour, but Richard didn't think they would go that far.

“I almost wish I had,” his mother admitted. “But this worked out better than I could have ever imagined. The Season hasn't ended, but I get to throw a wedding, gain a wonderful daughter-in-law and a confidant. We women must stick together.”

The Duke groaned, rolling his eyes. "Do not start with that, Diane. I am your confidant and have been so for over twenty-five years. That has to count for something."

"It does, dear," the Duchess assured. "I simply meant that having another woman to talk to about things a man has no knowledge of will be a blessing."

The Duke seemed happy with that explanation because he resumed eating and said nothing more. Richard followed suit and tucked into his food, not wanting it to grow cold. Most of it was already, but what mattered was still warm.

They were interrupted some moments later when Cavendish stood at the door and announced he had a letter for him.

"For me?" asked Richard. "At this time of the day?"

"Yes, my lord. Shall I bring it to you or leave it in your room?"

"I'll take it now," he replied, holding out his hand.

"Who is it from, dear?" his mother asked.

Richard turned the letter over, his frown turning upside down. "Sophia."

But why would she send him a note at this time of the day? Richard's smile fell as his stomach clenched. He could tell that something was wrong. He didn't know why, but he could just sense it.

“That's lovely!” his mother exclaimed. “Are you now exchanging secret letters confessing your undying love for each other?”

“Ever the romantic,” the Duke muttered. “Let the boy open his letter in peace, my dove. Can you not see he is troubled? This is a rather odd hour to have a letter delivered. Sophia could have waited until the morning, but something must have driven her to send it now.”

The Duchess's expression quickly changed. “What does it say, son? Is something wrong with Sophia?”

Richard didn't want to open the letter in front of his parents. What if it held bad news? He wanted to be able to process it alone before informing his parents about it.

Why do I sense it's bad? Surely, Sophia could not have changed her mind about me again?

“Please excuse me,” he told his parents. “I wish to read this in the other room.”

“But—” his mother protested, getting up.

The Duke immediately put his hand out, shaking his head. "Let our son handle the matter. Whether good or bad, I'm sure he will let us know."

The Duchess nodded reluctantly and settled back in her chair. "We'll be right here, son. I'm sure it's nothing terrible. 'Tis too close to the wedding for it to be anything but good news."

Richard's mother sounded hopeful, but there was a false note to it. She was as doubtful as he was and was struggling to hide it.

He left them, clutching the letter tightly between his fingers. Sophia might have a question for him and couldn't wait until morning to ask him. That was a possibility, wasn't it?

"I suppose I'll find out soon enough," he muttered.

Richard gravitated towards the drawing-room, not bothering to find a chair as he tore the letter open. He read through the letter quickly at first but wasn't entirely confident he had understood its message. Richard took his time the second time, his fingers tracing the words.

"What is this?" he cried.

Had Sophia lost her mind? How could she make such a decision on her own? Richard did sit down this time, his hands falling on either side of the armchair as though he couldn't hold them up.

Sophia wanted to end their engagement and clearly expected him to be happy about it. She was giving him a way out of a previously unwanted marriage, and he wouldn't be at fault because she would take all the blame. Did she even think this through?

“Her reputation will be in tatters, never to be fixed again,” he protested, holding the letter to his face. “She doesn't understand it, or she has truly lost her mind.”

Richard didn't want to end the engagement; he wanted to get married to her. What right did she have to play with their lives like this?

Richard reread the letter, stopping where Sophia wrote that he could be with Elizabeth and ask for her hand in marriage instead.

“Oh, Sophia,” he cried, shaking his head. “You still believe I should be with your sister.”

But that wasn't so. Perhaps, in the beginning, Richard did believe Elizabeth would have been the better sister to marry, but not anymore. It had taken being with Sophia to see Elizabeth's shallowness and her selfishness.

The day she had complained about an injured ankle had been enough proof that Richard had narrowly missed a catastrophe by marrying the woman. All she had wanted to talk about was herself and had even lied about her ankle, yet Sophia had tried to cover it up.

Richard had noticed it all, but he had said nothing. It wouldn't have done anyone any good to uncover Elizabeth's nasty ways, so he had let it be. At least now he knew he would have never been happy with her in the long run.

However, Sophia would make a wonderful companion. The woman was worth her weight in gold and would never give him cause to regret marrying her.

"She will be a life partner who will respect me," Richard declared to the room. "Someone who will be my friend and...and..."

Richard couldn't say the next few words out loud because he still didn't know how to approach his feelings. Simply put, he was attracted to Sophia and probably had been from the moment he had kissed her so many moons ago.

Richard had not been able to admit this to himself, but he had never forgotten about the kiss. It had been branded on his mind and continued to haunt him whenever he thought about it. Not even Nicholas was aware of these feelings.

"I suppose I kissed the right person after all," Richard mused to himself.

What would everyone say once they knew that he was genuinely attracted to someone everyone had rejected and labelled ugly and unworthy of attention? Richard laughed—they would think he was insane and suffering the effects of Sophia's love potion. If there had been a potion, it would have been on her lips, because that was where it all began.

It seems that the more I see of her, the more I'm drawn to her. I'm attracted to everything about her, from her glorious hair to her extraordinary mind, her luminous eyes, her beautiful smile, and her kind heart. I am mentally, spiritually, and physically attracted to her. That has certainly never happened before.

The attraction was so complete that Richard wondered if it had anything to do with love. He might be getting ahead of himself here, but he needed to consider it going forward.

"Richard?" he heard his mother call before a soft knock came at the door. "Is everything well?"

"I'm sorry, son," came his father's voice. He sounded out of breath. "I couldn't stop her."

Richard laughed. "Come in, Mother."

The door whipped open, admitting a very anxious looking duchess. "What did Sophia say, son? Is she well? Is it about the wedding?"

Should he tell the truth? No, there was no reason to worry his parents. Richard planned to marry Sophia on the day chosen, and that was that. She would simply have to give up this ridiculous notion of calling off the engagement and accept that she would be the next Countess of Brittingham.

"All is well, Mother," he assured. "Sophia merely wished to tell me

about something she recalled and didn't want to wait until tomorrow. She can be like that at times.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” the woman exclaimed, her hand going to her bosom. “I was so worried she had called the wedding off! I might have attempted to kidnap her and bring her here until the wedding and force her to marry you.”

Richard's mouth fell open. “Mother!”

"What?" she asked. "I mean it, Richard. I want Sophia Emley to become my daughter and your wife. She is perfect for you and this family, and I want nothing to come in between that. I'm actually glad that people rejected her for so long, or she might have been married by now, and I would have lost the perfect daughter-in-law. I suppose everything worked out in the end. Well, I'm off to have my dessert now—syllabub and cheesecake."

The Duchess glided out of the room, her husband casting Richard a helpless look of amusement before following her.

"I do not think I have ever realised how insane my mother truly is," Richard said aloud. "No wonder she likes Sophia so much. They are both uncommon women."

His mother must have seen a kindred spirit in Sophia and decided that the woman belonged to them. Richard agreed with his mother. Sophia belonged with them whether she liked it or not.

How was he going to get her alone and talk to her? He needed to

convince her that marrying him was the right thing to do. A slow smile stretched his lips as the perfect plan practically walked into his head.

Sophia needs to grow used to the idea of being called Lady Brittingham because she is not going to get away from me.

Chapter 21

“Sophia, dear,” her mother called, walking into the room. “You need to get ready.”

Sophia put down her paintbrush and pushed back a tendril that had come loose from the untidy bun she had put her hair in.

“Why?”

“Diane has invited us to tea. She must want to hear how our arrangements for the wedding breakfast are coming along.”

Sophia's heart plummeted. See Richard? “Would you mind if I stayed behind, Mama? You can go with Elizabeth.”

That should give Richard and Elizabeth time to come up with a way to announce their engagement as soon as Sophia let their parents know about her decision. However, why would the Duchess ask to see them today when they were supposed to have dinner with them tomorrow? By then, Sophia would have called off the wedding, and her sister would be happy again.

“You are the Hatherton bride, Sophia!” her mother scolded. “What do you mean you wish to stay behind? No, no. Wear that lovely white dress with the gold lace and for heaven's sake, make sure you do not have any paint smudges on you.”

Sophia inwardly sighed. "Very well. I need at least half an hour."

"Twenty minutes."

"Twenty-five."

"Twenty," her mother said firmly. "You have never needed much time, and there is no reason to need it now. Go and get ready. I'll have Mallory bring the carriage around."

Goodness! Why did the Duchess want to see them? This was unneeded stress. Had Richard perhaps told her about the letter she had sent, and that was what the woman wished to discuss? No, he wouldn't be that foolish, not when it concerned his future with Elizabeth.

I suppose I can sit silently by for a few hours while they discuss a wedding that will never happen. Mind you, they could put Elizabeth in my place and keep all the arrangements as is. All they would need to do is tell the reverend that the first names have changed.

Sophia didn't take long to clean up and don a new dress. When Patricia Emley said twenty minutes, she meant twenty minutes. She found her mother and sister waiting downstairs and Sophia couldn't help but notice that Elizabeth was wearing a similar dress to her own. Had their mother told Elizabeth what she would be wearing?

Obviously, Elizabeth looked better, but that was to be expected. Sophia didn't even bat an eyelash but walked past them and to the carriage awaiting them, not hearing what her mother said. They

caught up with her in the carriage where the older Emley woman proceeded to give Sophia a tongue lashing.

“What is wrong with you today?” the woman asked. “You spilt the milk all over the breakfast table this morning, you put salt instead of sugar in your tea, you wore your dress inside out, and you failed to help your sister with her sewing. Now, you simply walked right past me as though I didn't exist! Do you think becoming a countess suddenly absolves you of the need to listen to your own mother?”

It seemed everyone wanted to attack her over foolish things. Sophia didn't want to argue or fight-- she was too tired. Besides, she needed to preserve her energy for this evening when she planned to inform her parents about calling off the engagement.

They would likely ostracise her, but Sophia was ready for that. She had enough nip money saved to find a little cottage to stay in for at least two months, secure employment as a governess, and live her life. That was all she wanted right now.

“Forgive me, Mama,” said Sophia. “I did not intend to disrespect or hurt you.”

The anger in her mother's eyes evaporated, and concern took over. “Are you unwell, dear? Come, let me feel your brow.”

Sophia brought her head forward. She was not sick, but her mother would not rest until she knew for herself. The woman placed a cool hand across Sophia's brow, keeping it there for moment or so.

“No, you do not have a fever, but you are rather pale,” her mother declared.

“I’ll be fine, Mama.”

“If you say so, but if at any time you feel unwell during the tea, we shall go. I want you to be well-rested for your wedding.”

The wedding again. Sophia wanted something else to talk about, or she would scream.

“I’ll ensure Sophia gets plenty of sleep before the wedding, Mama,” Elizabeth promised. “We wouldn’t want her to look terrible, would we?”

Elizabeth gave Sophia a ghastly smile that seemed to say, “You’ll be ugly no matter what you do.” Sophia hung her head. Her sister would soon stop her behaviour once she had Richard in her life again.

“Certainly not!” their mother exclaimed. “This wedding will be the talk of the town, and everything must go perfectly. No more absentmindedness on your part, Sophia. We cannot look like fools to your in-laws.”

“Yes, Mama.”

They arrived at the Hatherton Manor too soon for Sophia’s nerves, but she could do nothing else but leave the carriage. Would Richard be

happy to see Elizabeth? Although it had been her decision to end the engagement, Sophia didn't want to see their love reflected in each other's eyes. It would be too much to handle so soon.

Richard met them at the front door, looking handsome and every inch the earl he was. Sophia avoided his eyes and stood behind her mother and sister. However, Richard had other ideas as he greeted them all and took her hand. Startled, she met his eyes. What was he doing? The man only smiled at her and curled his fingers firmly about her hand.

"I'm happy to see you, Sophia. My mother has been talking about you and nothing else for days now, so I suggested she should invite you all to tea."

He was the one who had suggested it? Why? He knew she was going to end their engagement tonight.

"We're glad to be here, Richard," her mother said. "My girls and I enjoy your company immensely."

"Certainly," Elizabeth added. "You are the best company there is in all of England."

"What do you say, Sophia?" Richard asked. "Are we good company?"

"Yes."

“Then come inside,” he said, pulling her towards him. “Mother has gone a tad overboard with our tea, I’m afraid. You will have to take some home with you.”

Richard led Sophia inside first, barely noticing his soon-to-be mother-in-law and new fiancée.

I do not think he should be holding his future sister-in-law's hand like this. Especially not in front of Elizabeth.

Her sister's eyes had flashed with annoyance when Richard had taken Sophia's hand, while their mother had been slightly taken aback. It wasn't necessarily correct to hold your fiancée in such a way, but most people allowed Richard to do as he pleased.

Sophia wanted him to let go of her hand. She couldn't stand the nearness of him. It hurt too much. More than that, her body was tingling all over and had grown uncomfortably warm. She just needed a moment to herself, and she would be fine, but Richard kept hold of her hand until he had seated her next to him.

“Oh dear!” The Duchess laughed. “It seems my son wishes to have the monopoly of your time and affections today.”

Which was strange. Richard had never behaved like this before. It seemed like he was making sure that Sophia couldn't leave his sight, or was she reading into things that were not there?

He certainly is acting unusually. I do not know for whose benefit, but it certainly isn't mine! I'm about to end our engagement while he pretends to

be happily in love.

"I have no worry about our children being a cheerful couple, Diane," her mother commented. "Just look at them now."

Sophia caught her sister's scowl and wished the woman would have better control over her emotions. Elizabeth needed to stay in the Duchess's good graces if she expected to become the woman's daughter-in-law. Sophia might be the one giving up the position, but Richard's parents would still need to allow their relationship. Perhaps Sophia should steer the Duchess towards her sister.

"Elizabeth is an excellent player on the pianoforte," she said, turning to Richard's mother. "You should have her play for you."

"Indeed?" the Duchess asked. "I would love to hear her sometime. There will be plenty of opportunity in the future when we are one big happy family."

"You play as well, Sophia," said Richard.

Now, why did he have to go and say that? The man was making no sense to her at all. Didn't he realise that his mother needed to like Elizabeth enough to consider her a daughter-in-law of his family?

"I'm sure you play beautifully, my dear," the Duchess claimed.

"I do fine, I suppose."

“Do not be so modest, Sophia!” Mrs Emley chided before turning to the other woman. “Sophia excels at everything she does, including musical instruments. Even her tutors took great pleasure in teaching her.”

The Duchess nodded. “I thought as much. Perhaps you can play for us today, my dear? We have a lovely pianoforte in the drawing-room.”

“Oh, I'm sure Elizabeth would be delighted to play in my stead,” Sophia insisted. “I'm afraid my fingers are a little stiff today.”

“Stiff?” Richard asked, taking her hands in his.

Sophia sucked in her breath at the sudden contact and tried to draw her hand away, but Richard held on.

“Richard,” she protested, her voice barely audible.

“Do they hurt?” he asked.

“Not at all,” she said, finally removing her hand from his. “They are merely stiff.”

“That's a shame, dear,” the Duchess said, clearly disappointed. “Why don't we have some tea? That should help their obstinance.”

Yes, because tea could cure anything.

"Actually, I wish to show Sophia a room I am renovating for her," Richard told his mother. "She needs a room for her paintings, and I have just the one."

Sophia's heart sunk all the way to her feet. Why would he show her a room that she could never enjoy? He was tormenting her.

"How sweet of you, Richard!" her mother gushed. "That sounds like the perfect thing for Sophia. I'm just so happy to know my daughter will be well cared for in your home."

Richard drew a very reluctant Sophia to her feet, this time linking his fingers with hers. Why didn't anyone reprimand him? This touching wasn't allowed just yet! The Duchess and her mother merely seemed amused, and Elizabeth...well, her anger could be felt across the room. Thank goodness Richard had seated them opposite each other.

"You can let go now," Sophia told him as soon as they had left the room.

"Why? I rather like holding your hand."

"Didn't you get my letter?"

“I did.”

Was that all he was going to say? “Well?”

“Let's talk about it in this room right here,” Richard suggested.

Sighing, Sophia entered the place, jumping a foot in the air when the door slammed shut behind her. Richard wasn't touching it, so how on earth did it close on its own?

She pulled her hand from his and tried to open the door, but it refused to budge. What on earth?

“It's locked,” she cried.

“Is it? Good.”

“Good?” she said, whirling around to face him. “What is good about being locked alone in a room?”

Richard smiled. “It's good if I planned it that way. I figured it was the only way to avoid being disturbed by anyone.”

Sophia closed her eyes and tilted her head back, massaging her temples. “You're not making any sense, Richard.”

"Why don't we take a seat, and I can explain everything?" he suggested, gesturing to the couch.

Sophia noted thereonly being one in the room, and she did not fancy sitting next to him right at that moment.

"I prefer to stand, thank you. Now, just tell me what is going on so I can leave. I cannot understand what you mean to do by all of this." She was not giving him a chance to speak. "Do you not wish to be rid of me so you can marry Elizabeth? Because locking us in a room is not the way to go about doing so. This could cause another scandal and tie you to me forever! Do you want that?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

What? Maybe he hadn't heard what she said. "I think you have misunderstood me."

Richard shook his head. "Not at all. The truth is that I no longer have any feelings for your sister, and I believe I am falling in love with you."

Perhaps she needed that couch after all. Sophia walked with wobbly knees and collapsed on the dark purple cushions. She patted her chest, willing her heart rate to return to normal.

"He is going to kill me," she muttered. "He is going to kill me. What

does he think he's doing? What is he saying?"

The couch dipped a bit as Richard sat down, prompting her to scoot to the end until she nearly fell over—she would have if not for him reaching out to steady her. Sophia snatched her hand back with a muttered “thank you,” earning a chuckle from him.

“You are the only woman I have to work hard to get, Miss Sophia Emley. Most women would be glad to be locked in a room with me.”

“I give you my blessing to fetch those women and replace me with them.”

“I'm afraid I cannot do that,” he said. “Not when I'm falling in love with you.”

There he went again! “What is happening here, Richard? What is this confession? You love my sister, and she loves you. I have given you a way to marry her, and yet you have me locked in here with you. Why?”

Richard ran his fingers through his hair, breathing out harshly. “Why must you be so stubborn? I want you, not Elizabeth! I wish to explore these feelings I have with you because I have never experienced them before. I want to marry you, Sophia Emley, and only you. Read my lips: I want you.”

Sophia stilled. Her heart seemed to be in shock as well because it slowed down, making her feel a queer sense of calm. Richard was admitting his feelings for her, and he didn't love Elizabeth. No, that

didn't sound right.

"How can you have feelings for someone like me? Have you forgotten what you and others have called me?"

Richard winced, looking down at his fingers. "I realise that I was not a good man before. I judged you without knowing you, and I regret that. What I do not regret is having kissed you instead of your sister, and becoming engaged to you because of it. I did at first, and I'll readily admit to that, but that was before I got to know who you really are."

Sophia didn't want to believe what he was saying, but her resistance was crumbling.

"Who am I to you?" she asked.

"An intelligent, kind, wonderful, and beautiful woman."

Sophia snorted. "Beautiful?"

"Yes, beautiful," Richard insisted. "You're beautiful to me, Sophia. Your inner beauty called to me, but I must confess that I am attracted to you and have been since we kissed."

That about knocked her flat. Richard took her hands in his and brought them to his lips.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her voice slightly hoarse.

“Only this.” Richard kissed her hands. “Say that you’ll marry me, Sophia. Do not throw away our opportunity to be happy. I want to marry you, not because I want to save your reputation, but because I wish to be with you. Say yes.”

He was telling the truth; Sophia could see it in his eyes. Elation filled her, making her smile. Richard wanted her, and maybe even loved her. Would it be so wrong to confess what she felt for him?

“Would you believe that I think I’m falling in love with you?” she asked.

Richard’s eyes widened. “Why? I do not deserve your love.”

Sophia shrugged. “Why should it be explained? I just do. I do not know how Elizabeth will take this, but at least I know I did not steal you from her.”

There was some consolation in that. Elizabeth might hate her for the rest of their lives, but Sophia could handle it with Richard by her side.

“You cannot steal a willing person,” he said. “Does this mean our wedding is going ahead as planned?”

Sophia smiled. It certainly did, and she couldn't be happier.

Epilogue

The Wedding Day

Sophia was going to have a wonderful life; she knew this. So, why was she so sad?

Richard was a wonderful man, his parents adored her, and her own parents were happy. There was just one person who Sophia wished was just as happy for her.

The carriage—a lovely white and gold one—would arrive to whisk her away to Richard's family chapel where she would finally become Lady Brittingham, but Sophia could not enjoy the day as she wished she could. All she wanted at this moment was to have her sister with her.

She hadn't spoken to Elizabeth in two days—or rather, Elizabeth had refused to talk to her. It broke Sophia's heart, but there was not much she could do about it.

“Sophia?” her mother called, knocking on her door. “Are you ready? May I come in?”

Quickly wiping her tears away, Sophia fanned her face. “Yes, Mama.”

Her mother was elegantly dressed in a light blue dress that complimented her eyes and skin tone, but what really caught Sophia's

eye was the look of sadness mixed with joy on her mother's face.

“You look beautiful, dear,” the woman gushed. “I knew you would.”

“Thank you, Mama. I feel beautiful.”

Sophia really did. It was probably Richard's doing because he had not ceased to tell her how lovely he found her since locking them in the room, but she was grateful. For too long, she had looked in the mirror and seen an unattractive woman. Now she saw a woman who was loved and wanted.

“This is the day I lose you, but the Hathertons gain a wonderful daughter. I have taken you for granted, my child, and I did not realise how much until I woke up this morning and finally understood that I would no longer see you every day. It cut to my heart.”

The woman's eyes filled with tears as she took Sophia in her arms and held her close. It was one of the rare times her mother had embraced her so, and she relished it.

Finally, her mother stepped back, dabbing at the tears from her own eyes. “The carriage is downstairs, but Elizabeth insisted that she had to speak with you first. I'll tell her to come in.”

Her sister wanted to speak to her? Sophia hoped Elizabeth wouldn't say any cruel words today.

The younger woman came in moments later, her head bowed. She wore an uncharacteristically subdued dress of beige with hints of light green. It was hardly one of her best dresses.

That doesn't seem like Elizabeth at all.

“You wished to see me, Lizzy?”

Elizabeth lifted her head, showing Sophia her stricken face. Alarmed, Sophia went to her but stopped short of touching her.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“You're asking me when I should ask you,” her sister said, giving a tremulous smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I've been so horrible to you, Saffi,” Elizabeth cried. “I do not even know how to face you! How can you be so kind to me when I hurt you?”

Stunned, Sophia could only stare at her sister. Was she apologising?

“Say something.”

"I...I don't know what to say. I'm worried that whatever I'll say will anger you again. I don't want to do that."

Elizabeth wailed and turned her back on Sophia, her shaking shoulders the only indication she was crying.

"Lizzy!" Sophia cried. "Please, just speak to me."

Her sister turned and fell into her arms, nearly knocking Sophia over. "I'm so sorry, Saffi. I'm so, so, sorry. My jealousy turned me into a terrible person, someone I am ashamed of. How could I have treated my own sister like that? Said the things I said?"

She was apologising! All Sophia's tension and sadness seeped out of her body. This is what she had needed to hear.

"All is well, Lizzy," Sophia said, patting her sister's back. "I forgive you."

Elizabeth pulled back, her face red but still pretty. "Just like that? You will not scold me or ban me from your life? I know that I deserve worse."

Sophia shook her head. "You are my sister, and I love you. It was hellish not having you with me as I got ready for my..."

Sophia fell silent. She didn't want to rub the fact that she was marrying Richard in her sister's face.

"You can say it," Elizabeth encouraged. "This is your special day, and you are marrying a man who adores you. I knew it for a while, but I refused to accept it. I still thought I could have him, but he is rightfully yours. And I know you could have never tricked him—you're too honest for that."

Sophia smiled. "You do not know how happy this makes me. Now, my joy is complete. Will you walk me out of my room? This is my last time being a single woman."

Elizabeth nodded, drying her tears. "I would be honoured to walk my sister to her carriage."

That was the beauty of love between siblings. No matter how hard or terrible one's actions may be, it took one heartfelt sorry, and all was forgiven. Now, Sophia could look forward to being with Richard and imagining their future together. If this moment indicated what was to come, then it was a good start indeed.

Two Months Later

Richard was running a little late, but he couldn't leave until he was confident he knew what he would say to Sophia. She was waiting at the beach with a packed picnic and likely enjoying the sea. His wife had taken to the water as a fish would and wasn't satisfied until she had spent an hour or two in the gentle waves.

It was ridiculous that it had taken him two months to know for certain that he loved Sophia. He had once confessed that he might love her, and that had been it. The word love had never been mentioned again between them, although Richard could sense it from Sophia in how she spoke to him, took care of him, and did little things that added so much.

His father had said that the little things made a marriage worthwhile, and Richard was inclined to agree. He may have been a married man for all of two months, but it wasn't challenging to understand what made a good marriage.

"Is my horse saddled?" he asked the butler.

Sampson nodded. "Yes, my lord."

"Good, good. Lady Brittingham and I will return around five, I think. You may arrange for dinner to be eaten at six."

"Yes, my lord. Do we go ahead as planned?"

The butler spoke of the romantic evening Richard had organised some days ago, but he kept putting it off because he would lose his nerve. It shouldn't be so difficult to tell his wife that he loved her, but the fear that she didn't return his feelings worried him. What if her kind and thoughtful actions were merely her nature and not an indication of her love for him?

"Yes. Arrange everything as we spoke of. I am finally doing it today."

“Good for you, my lord,” said Sampson, grinning and showing missing teeth. “I shall inform the others.”

The servants all doted on their mistress and were excited to be part of his grand romantic gesture, but it also put pressure on him.

“Wish me luck, Sampson.”

“You do not need it, my lord. Not when you have my lady by your side.”

“Good point. I shall see you later.”

Richard’s heart started beating fast as he left the house and swung onto his horse. This was it. In a few moments, he would reach Sophia and confess his love to her.

I had better not make a mess of it.

* * *

Sophia was grateful that she had taken her coat today because the beach was rather chilly. Fortunately, there was no wind, or it would have been in all the food. Cook had been so adamant about making it the best picnic basket for miles that it had taken most of the morning. Then, Richard had asked her to go ahead with the carriage and he

would meet her at the beach. They were both acting strangely today, and that went for the other servants as well.

“Odd, the lot of them.”

Sophia plucked another juicy strawberry from the basket. Her hunger had gotten the best of her, and she had started eating without Richard. He would understand, but she was feeling a tad guilty. Lately, she had been hungrier than usual and sometimes a little queasy in the mornings. Sophia put it down to being in a different area. The smell of the sea was different from that of the countryside, but she loved them both. Coming to Brighton on their honeymoon had been Richard’s best idea yet.

Was his lateness an indication of his waning interest in her? Sophia often worried about that. Sometimes, she would question if marrying him had been the right thing after all.

“You know that you love him and cannot imagine a life without him,” she scolded herself. “Stop thinking about such negative things.”

People eventually realised that she hadn’t stolen Richard from Elizabeth, but that seemed to shock them even more. No one could understand what a man like Richard saw in her, but he would always assure her that he wanted to be with her and no one else.

“So, why do I still catch myself wondering if he would have rather married Elizabeth?” she asked aloud.

Perhaps it had something to do with waiting to hear three words that

would make all the difference.

“I love you,” she whispered.

Richard had once mentioned that he believed he was falling in love with her, but he never admitted to loving her. Perhaps her novelty had worn off, and now he was regretting his decision.

Sighing, Sophia stuffed another strawberry in her mouth and looked out to sea.

“Are there any left for me?” said a familiar voice.

Sophia's face immediately lit up with a smile. “There will be if you are quick enough.”

Richard's warm body enveloped her from behind before he sat down next to her.

“I'm sorry I'm so late. I had a few things to sort out.”

What things were they? Sophia didn't ask aloud—men didn't like to be nagged, and she had sternly told herself that she would not become one of those wives.

“You're here now, and that's all that matters.”

“What did Cook pack for us? I asked her to make it extra special.”

“Oh, so you are the one who had her so worked up that she repacked it three times before she was satisfied? The poor woman was quite overwhelmed.”

Richard grimaced. “I didn't mean to cause her trouble. I simply wished this day to be special.”

“Why? Every day is special.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But this day holds a little more significance than the other days.”

What surprise did he have up his sleeve now? “Oh? And why would that be?”

Richard dragged his hands through his hair and took a deep breath. “I had an entire speech planned for this, but I cannot recall one word of it. Well, I remember at least three words, but not much else.”

Sophia chuckled. “That is unlike you. What speech is this?”

Richard surprised her by getting to his knees and moving to kneel in front of her. Sophia kept her smile, but she also frowned up at him.

What was he up to?

“Sophia Hatherton, my dear Lady Brittingham, nothing has made me happier than being your husband, and I know that I can look forward to many more happy days. However, you deserve to know the truth.”

Sophia's heart stopped. “The truth?” she asked, her voice slightly strangled.

Was he about to tell her that he regretted getting married to her? That he loved Elizabeth after all?

Why would he tell me he is happy and then dash my heart to pieces?

“Why do you look so afraid?” he asked, drawing her to her knees. “You're trembling!”

“What do you wish to tell me?” she pressed.

“That I love you. Now, tell me, what has you so scared?”

“You love me?”

“Of course, but stop changing the subject. Did something happen while I was gone? Did someone scare you?”

To her horror, Sophia burst out crying. She had been so terrified that he had decided to leave her after all that it never entered her mind that he loved her!

“My love!” Richard cried. “Tell me what is wrong.”

“I love you too,” she blubbered. “I love you so much.”

Richard stilled for just a moment before embracing her in a tight hug. “Thank goodness! I was afraid I was the only one.”

“You were afraid?” she asked, pulling away. “I was afraid you might not wish to be with me after all.”

Richard's jaw dropped. “What? But I just told you that I'm happy. Why would I give that up?”

“Foolishness?”

“Then I suppose we are both fools, but at least we love each other.”

Yes, at least there was that.

They spent the rest of the afternoon gazing into each other's eyes and

saying "I love you" over and over again. Sophia doubted they would grow tired of saying those three words for the rest of their lives together.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Sophia and Richard? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

Would Sophia and her sister manage to put their bitter past behind them?

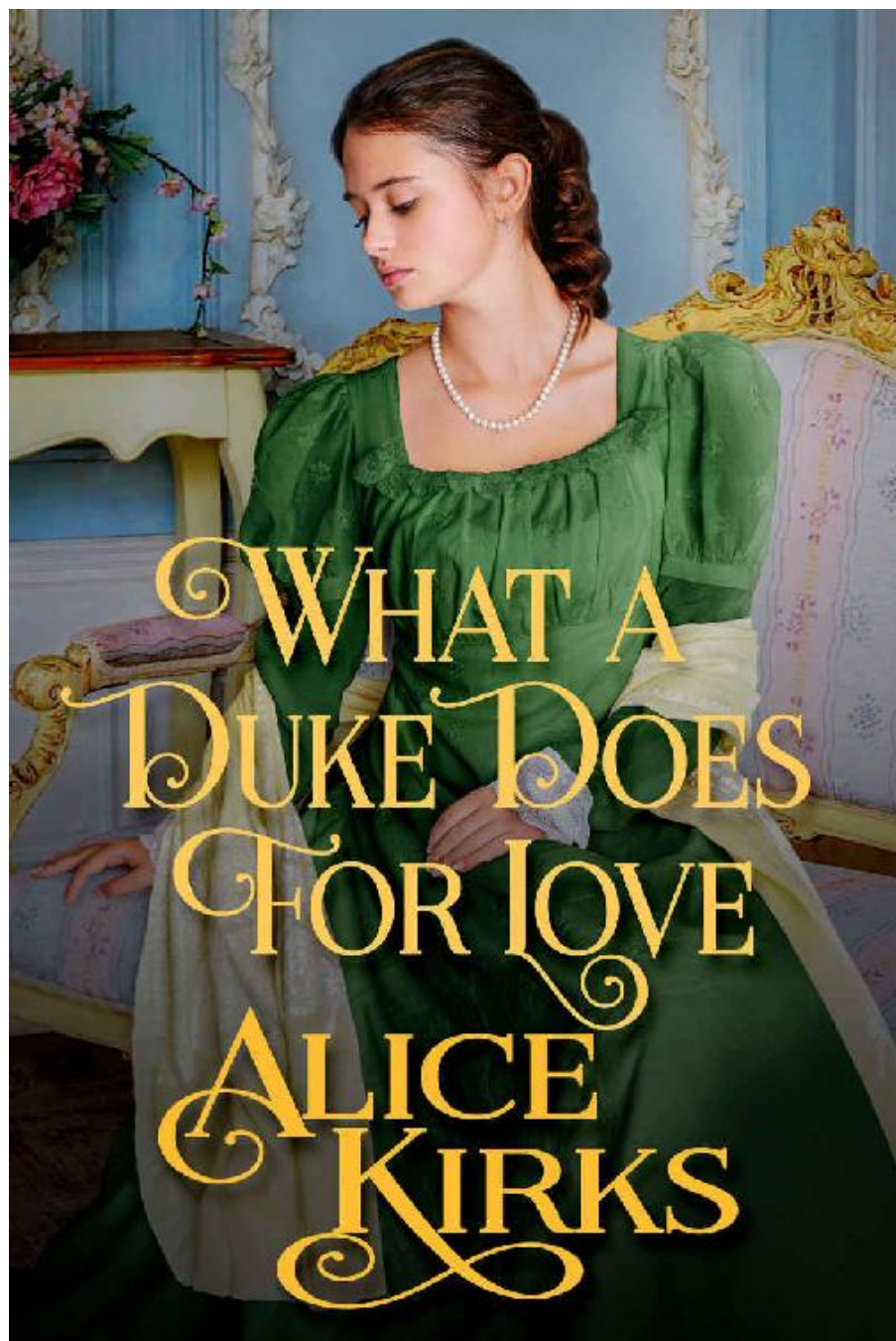
What beautiful surprise will be awaiting Sophia in the drawing room?

*In what way will Sophia disobey her husband, and how will Richard
respond to that?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://alicekirks.com/sophia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “**What a Duke Does for Love**”, my Amazon Best-Selling
novel!)*



What a Duke Does for Love

Introduction

Following the death of her beloved brother, Lady Marlana Ashover finds herself in unbearable grief and suspicious of what truly happened to her brother. Even though she convinces her family to travel to London with the excuse of the Season, Marlana vows to secretly investigate her brother's loss and find its true cause. When she meets a young Duke who wants to help her in her quest, Marlana finds not only a loyal friend in him, but also the greatest love of her life...

Will Marlana solve the mystery of her brother's demise despite the lurking dangers? Could the kind hearted Duke be the person who will bring light into her gloomy life?

Ryan Wellston, the Duke of Claypool, has never had genuine feelings for other women except for Marlana. However, no matter how much he wants to help and make her happy, tremendous challenges are threatening his hopes and dreams... Nevertheless, Ryan is determined to do everything in his power to find the answers to the burning questions of who killed James and why. Will the charismatic Duke manage to bring the truth to the surface? Will he eventually shine a smile upon his dear Marlana's face?

If only things were always as they seemed...

While Ryan and Marlena are unable to deny their blooming feelings, they first have to deal with the chaos that dominates their lives. Especially since someone is determined to separate them and steal their every chance at happiness forever. Will the two soulmates shed light on an unforgivable truth and heal their past wounds together? Or will the current threats and emotional storm irreversibly overshadow their growing love?

Prologue

Marlena sat in the drawing-room and looked down at her hands where they rested on the black taffeta of her gown, the white skin contrasting with the dark fabric. She focused on them, willing herself to feel something.

She wished she could feel some emotion that would connect her to herself. Right now, she felt like those were someone else's hands and not hers, as if she was somewhere else, floating above the black-clad young woman with the pale brown hair pulled back in a severe style.

"Can I fetch you something, Marlena?" her mother asked. She was standing across from her, black-dressed, her own dark hair pulled back from her face. She had a teapot in her hand, from which she poured cups of tea for the guests.

"No, thank you," Marlena said.

She didn't want to eat or drink anything. She didn't want to be here. If she had the choice, she would be out riding in the fields, her hair loose, soaked with the rain as she screamed her pain and sorrow to the empty skies. She would not be here in this cold, emotionless drawing-room with cold, silent people pretending they felt nothing.

If she could, she would scream James' name so loud the windows would shatter.

He was her brother, and he was dead, and it was wrong.

Why could she not cry?

“Would you care to go outdoors?”

Marlena nodded. Charles, her elder brother, was here, newly returned from the army. She was so grateful that he had managed to attend and cared for her as always. He sat across from her on the chaise-longue beside their father, and his blue eyes were gentle as they regarded her. Marlena felt like he understood her. He was, in many ways, like her. He would rather be elsewhere, she thought.

“Thank you,” she said. “I would.”

She knew that if there were any difficulty in leaving, he would attend to it. He had a strong character like hers, not like James, who lay in the churchyard. James was so gentle, so tender. He was the younger of her two brothers, and he had never hurt anyone, never so much as said a cross word.

He nodded to her and stood, stretching his back as he did so. “Mother, Father ... we are going to take the air outside a moment. Excuse us.”

“Charles, that isn’t proper ...” his mother began.

He smiled at her gently. “Mother, it’s quite acceptable. Nobody will mind if we take five minutes to walk and stretch our legs. We shall be

back in plenty of time.”

Marlena looked gratefully at Charles. He had always had a good way about him – able to stand firm but without needing to resort to anger to do so. He would make a fine viscount, she was sure.

She glanced at their father on the way to the door. He nodded to her from where he sat on the chaise-longue, blue eyes troubled. He looked drawn and pale, and she felt her heart thump, filled with worry for him. She squeezed her own blue eyes shut for a moment as she walked along with Charles. Her father had been so ill, and she feared the shock of James passing would challenge his already-weakened health.

“Thank you,” she said again when they were out of earshot.

Charles smiled at her. His blue eyes were sad, but he still managed to find the strength somewhere to grin at her. “I thought we could both use some fresh air.”

“Yes,” Marlena murmured. It was stifling in the drawing-room – stiflingly silent. She couldn’t bear it. She looked up at Charles. “I can’t make sense of it,” she said.

Charles inclined his head, agreeing distantly. “I know,” he said. He looked out over the lawns, his own face still. “I think it makes no sense. Someone so young, to be gone so quickly.” Charles was older than Marlena by eight years and older than James by five.

“I don’t mean that,” Marlena said softly. “I mean, it makes no sense that our brother passed in a riding accident. You knew how good he

was.” She walked across the grass beside him, feeling the need to move.

Charles looked into her eyes, stopping beside her. “Marlena, it doesn’t always matter. Some accidents have very little to do with skill. Anyone can have an accident.”

Marlena shut her eyes a moment, feeling distressed. This was her brother, the one person who she could talk to besides her maidservant Henriette. Why could he not understand what she meant?

She felt as though there was something behind James’ death, something more. That it hadn’t been as told in the story they had received. She knew James, and what she might not have known about him in person, she knew about his skill as a horseman.

She had raced him so often! She knew his strengths and knew without question how good he was – she reckoned him to be among the best riders in the ton. He would not have come off his horse as they had been told he had.

“I just can’t help how I feel about it,” she said. She didn’t know what to say to him to make him hear her.

Charles took her hand. “Grief is a strange thing, my sister. It can take years before one comes to terms with something. I feel we would do better not to try to make sense of it now ... maybe in a year, we will be able to see it with a clearer perspective. For now, we should just weep and scream if we have to, and let ourselves slowly heal.”

Marlena felt tears down her cheeks. She looked up at her brother and rested a hand on his shoulder. She knew he was being kind, and his words had touched her heart. She knew, too, that in many ways, he was right. Her heart would slowly heal over the years, and she would slowly come to an understanding of what happened. But there were things that didn't fit.

"Thank you, Charles," she said. She knew she would not make him understand.

He rested a hand on her shoulder and looked into her eyes. "You are my dearest sister," he said gently. "You're so strong; your spirit inspires my own."

"Thank you, Charles," she repeated. She felt his kindness melted her heart, and, suddenly she found herself clinging to him, tears pouring down her cheeks as she held him, like when she was a toddler, and she had come to Charles, her safe place in a cold and confusing world. He wrapped his arms around her, like he had when she was just a baby, and held her and let her weep. It was the first time she had cried, and she knew that it would be months – maybe years – before she could cry for James properly. Now, she cried mainly for herself.

Charles held her for a long moment. After she sniffed slowly, her tears running down her face, he stood back. "All right?"

She nodded, reaching into the little drawstring bag she had around her wrist, where she kept a handkerchief. She blew her nose, sniffing noisily. "Yes," she said.

He smiled. "My wild sister. Look at you ... all windswept."

She lifted a hand to her head where some of her honey-blonde hair had escaped. She shook her head, flushing.

“It just does that.”

He smiled softly, took her hand, and led her back to the house.

She held his hand and felt better, but she could not shake the feeling that the story they had heard of James’ death was not quite right. She could not accept that he had simply been thrown from his horse.

And she was going to London to find the truth, whatever anyone said to her.

Chapter 1

A ball in the evening

Ryan looked around the hall at Almack's, feeling weary. He had attended the event mainly because he had to, not necessarily because he wished to. He didn't care for crowds of people or for socializing in general, especially not in London.

He glanced across at a young lady – Lady Camelia – who had been introduced to him by her father. She was pretty – brown-haired, round-cheeked, and with big brown eyes. He reckoned he might as well dance with her.

He was not particularly keen on balls, dances, or socializing in general. He tried his best not to form connections with anyone if he could avoid it. Being raised in almost isolation at his manor – with just tutors – following his father's death, had ensured that he had no preparation for society at all. It was easier he had found over the years, to adopt an indifferent air than to let people close.

"My Lady?" he said, approaching the young woman. "Would you like to dance?"

"Your Grace! I would be honoured." She curtsied, and he could see how flustered she seemed, her eyes downcast, breath quickening.

"Well, then. I think there's a Polonaise next. Shall we?"

“Yes, Your Grace! Why, what an honour. I’m quite dizzied.”

Ryan felt his own eyes squeeze shut a moment. He felt so awkward! What was he supposed to do or say? He stood silently beside her, waiting for the musicians to provide the opening melody.

He let his dark eyes wander across the dance floor, to where he could just spot the dark hair of his friend, Jasper, standing out against the white wall behind. He was leaning on the wall, drinking, and Ryan was sure it wasn’t cordial in that glass he held. He felt a little disgruntled: he could have done with Jasper’s assistance just then, he thought.

The music was starting, lively and melodic, and he took her hand and led her through the paces, feeling like he was a wooden marionette. He had to admit that Lady Camelia was a good dancer – elegant and gracious – but he couldn’t match her. He was tolerable as a dancer, he knew – his tutors had told him so, and at Cambridge, nobody had noticed anything else – but he didn’t feel right when he danced in London.

He didn’t feel right in London at all.

The music was moving to a new key, and he reckoned they were getting close to halfway. He counted his steps and focused firmly on the bright hall and the people, doing his best to ignore everyone and everything around him. He could feel her ladyship’s hand in his own, and he wished he could think to make conversation, but he’d never been much good at it. He felt relieved when the music changed again, indicating they were nearing the end.

“Thank you,” he said as he bowed to Lady Camelia.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said. She looked at him as if she expected him to say something. Ryan took a deep breath.

“I will go and take refreshments,” he said. He turned around before she could ask him to fetch something and walked briskly to the table.

When he got there, Jasper walked over.

“I saw you, Ryan,” he said. His voice sounded pointed.

“What, old boy?” he asked mildly. He felt uncomfortable – like Jasper had something to pick him out about.

“I saw you run away from one of the prettier girls in the room without saying anything to her.” His expression showed hurt.

“I didn’t run away!” Ryan hissed, feeling annoyed. “I simply politely distanced myself.”

Jasper raised a brow. “Like always?”

Ryan drew a breath. He didn’t need Jasper to act as though he was the voice of rationality. He had his own system when it came to London

and the *ton*. He didn't need his friend to be so difficult. The most annoying thing about it was that he knew his friend was right. He was rude and what he did was unkind.

"Yes, all right. I don't tend to make friendships easily. I am rude quite a lot of the time because I barely talk. But I don't need my best friend – my *only* friend – to be so critical."

He felt overly warm, his black velvet jacket seeming suddenly too hot. He wished he could take it off, but nobody would attend Almack's in just shirtsleeves. He looked up at Jasper, who smiled fondly.

"I am aware you don't," he said. "But I will be critical, anyway – I offer it as a service, absolutely without asking any money for it."

They looked at each other. Ryan grinned. He could never resist his friend's jokes; not for long, anyhow.

"Very well, Jasper. You are right. I am rude. And quite probably worse, too. But you know what it's like – I'm too old to learn new ways."

Jasper looked at him, and Ryan could see fondness in his brown eyes.

He was about to say something when Jasper's wife came across to join them. A pretty woman – plump, with reddish hair and the palest, softest skin Ryan had ever seen – she looked up at Jasper. Ryan saw his friend's expression soften. He looked down at his wife, Adeline, with such tenderness that Ryan felt his breath almost stop.

“Dearest,” Adeline said with a teasing look in her green-flecked eyes, “won’t you come here a moment? I’m arguing with Lord Rockley, and we need you to settle the conversation.”

Ryan looked at Jasper, who smiled lovingly at Adeline. He glanced at Ryan apologetically, but Ryan could see he didn’t regret for a moment going with Adeline.

“Excuse me, old chap,” he said.

Ryan inclined his head. “Of course, Jasper.” He gestured at the refreshments table. “I’ll just stay here, I reckon.”

Jasper smiled. “You could go and dance again, you know.”

Ryan shot him a look that was slightly exaggerated – he wasn’t really annoyed – and they both laughed. Lady Adeline smiled and curtsied to Ryan. “Good evening, Your Grace,” she said.

Ryan bowed, greeted her politely, and turned to the refreshments table. He felt strangely awkward and a little confused, too.

He had never seen anyone look at someone the way Jasper looked at Adeline. She looked just the same at him, too. He wondered at it. How might it feel to love someone the way the two of them loved one another? He couldn’t imagine.

“Why are you thinking about that?” he asked himself, annoyed.

He was the sort of fellow who liked his own company. He had told himself that repeatedly at Cambridge, and he told himself now that nothing had changed. The further you kept from people, the happier you would be – that was his phrase. He would believe that, too, except for how blissfully Jasper and his wife smiled at each other.

“Damn it, you’re moody today,” he told himself. He went to the table – where a small crowd had developed – and tried to reach a glass of something. There were two footmen in livery pouring drinks, and he nodded to one, receiving a glass of sparkling wine.

“Ah! Your grace! What an honour to see you here. It’s been years since I last called at Claypool.”

Ryan raised a brow. He recalled the fellow vaguely – Viscount Alsworth. He had been a captain in the army and was distantly related to the family. Ryan wasn’t in the mood for conversation right now, and he hastily looked about for an escape.

“Good to see you, Lord Alsworth. It’s so hot in here, isn’t it?” Ryan said, making a step towards the exit. There were two doors leading onto the balcony, and he went quickly in that direction. Lord Alsworth followed him a few paces.

“A fine evening. Yes, very warm! It’s all the bodies, you know.” He gestured at the room. “So many people, and you get a fine heat.”

Ryan nodded. He enjoyed Lord Alsworth's company sometimes – he was at least unconventional in the extreme, saying whatever happened to pop into his head – but right now, he wasn't equipped with enough energy. He walked to the doors, managed to slip in front of a few people, and hurried to the exit. There were some people by the door, but he managed to step outside.

He stood there on the balcony, taking gasps of air. He felt as if he'd been stifled underground in there, surrounded by so many people. Gradually becoming calmer, after a moment or two out there, he looked over the city. He could see lights here and there in windows, but it was mostly dark, the rooftops black against the midnight-dark sky. Stars twinkled overhead, silver and remote. He looked up, feeling oddly empty inside.

He was used to his own company, so it was strange to him that he should feel alone. But standing there under cold stars, he realised he had been alone most of his life. His parents had both died when he was a child – Mama when he was just two and Papa when he was eight. Tutors had raised him in Claypool, the family manor, which was held in trust for him by his tutor Marlford until he was sixteen.

He was a duke, but he had nobody besides Jasper he felt close to.

“Damn it, you're being silly,” he told himself harshly. He was twenty-four, a duke, and he liked his own company! He was not – absolutely not – feeling lonely.

He sniffed and walked towards the door leading into the hall. It was still crowded and overheated. He could see a dance beginning, people waltzing on the dance floor to the delicate strains of melody. The hall was a mass of black velvet suits, pale dresses, and bright candlelight, the smells of perfume and wine and beeswax subtle in the air.

Ryan stood by the door and tried to find a sense of peace and calm, though he was feeling shaken again. After that moment outside, realising his own aloneness, the ballroom seemed desperately foreign, as if he had wandered into another world whose rules made no sense to him.

“Excuse me.”

He stepped sideways, avoiding a group who had moved to stand nearer the entrance, and walked into the curtain hanging by the door. It unfurled to reveal a young girl, who looked at him with startled eyes.

“My Lady!” he gasped.

He found himself looking into the loveliest eyes. They were pale blue. He thought of skies and water, of bluebells and summer flowers and rivulets. He was so stunned by her wide gaze that it took him a second to step back, studying her – she had pale brown hair that was straight, drawn back from her face in a bun.

She was wearing a plain silk gown with a low-cut neck, simpler than the dresses of other ladies. Her face was heart-shaped and her eyes wide, framed with brown lashes and brows. She was beautiful in a strong, compelling way.

She looked up at him, and he thought shock was what he could read most strongly on her face – shock and insult.

“My Lord,” she said. She curtsied, and he could tell she was trying to rein in her feelings. She wasn’t able to keep the affronted tone from her voice, and he understood it. He bowed.

“I apologise, My Lady, for having walked into you. But you were hiding behind the curtain.” He couldn’t help a lift of his lips.

“I was simply trying to avoid unwanted company.”

He smiled broadly. “I don’t blame you, My Lady,” he said. “I found myself in the same spot. I went out to take the air. If you like, I could escort you there?” He looked at her hopefully. She was the first person he’d met that drew his heart like this. He felt the urge to speak to her and get to know her better, to understand what had driven her to hide there, and whether she was as much like him as he thought.

“No, thank you, My Lord,” she said. She sounded firm. “I would prefer to remain indoors.”

“Of course,” he said. Perhaps she was offended by the idea of being alone with an unknown gentleman. He glanced about, but if she was accompanied by a maidservant, he could see no sign of her. He turned back to her, bowing again. “I did not intend anything unseemly, My Lady.”

“Well, for that, I commend you, My Lord.” She was teasing him. He grinned, glad she was no longer angry with him.

“My Lady, might I fetch you some refreshment?” he asked. She had

moved towards the room, and he followed her, entranced. She walked with easy grace, and he kept up, wanting to be with her. He had never felt like this, so instantly captivated. He was eager to know more about her.

“No, thank you,” she said. She walked towards a group standing at the side of the room, waiting for the sarabande to end. Perhaps she wanted to dance with him. He felt his heart thump. He never enjoyed dancing, but now he was looking forward to it.

“You like to waltz?” he asked her, thinking there might be a waltz next.

She shrugged. “I am not really in the mood for dancing.”

He raised a brow. She was intriguing. So confident – he was not. He pretended to be, but his own attempts were cold and wooden. She was poised and filled with cool assurance.

“I see,” he said. He was about to ask what would entice her onto the floor when she stepped neatly around two people and went across the room.

Ryan stared. She was talking to a group of people – a tall blond man and two or three other men, some accompanied by ladies. He was about to go and ask to be introduced when a man came up to him.

“Your Grace!” he said, bowing low. “I am delighted to see you here. We met at the park if you recall? I am Lord Abermale. You have not yet been introduced to my daughter?”

Ryan took a deep breath. He looked around, wanting to give the unknown woman an earful. She had led him here with intent! She knew he would be lost in a sea of lords and ladies wanting their daughters to meet him. He was known to be young and wealthy, and that was enough to draw them close. He wanted to rebuke her.

He grinned inwardly. She had served him right. He had been rude all evening, and this was exactly the sort of treatment he merited.

He wished that he could have asked her name – he would love to talk to her again sometime.

Chapter 2

A morning and a walk

It was cool in the room, and Marlena sat up, blinking and still sleepy. She slipped out of bed, seeing that her maid Henriette had left one window ajar. She was grateful for the cool breeze, and she went to it, looking through the curtain at the scene below.

Her mind drifted back to the ball as she rubbed her eyes wearily. She had returned home after midnight, tired and half-asleep. She had surprised herself by enjoying the ball, and her mind drifted to thoughts of a particular gentleman she'd met.

"Stop being silly," she told herself firmly. He was a foppish Londoner with a rude manner, and she was not going to think of him. She stared down at the street, watching the traffic.

Marlena had never been overly fond of London, but it was oddly diverting after spending a year in the countryside. She watched people walking and coaches trying to get around a cart that had tried to turn in the road. She grinned to herself as a constable came over to observe. He wasn't winning favours from the carter or the gentlefolk, she thought with amusement. She could almost hear them shouting at him.

She went to the pitcher of water on the nightstand and rinsed her face, smiling to herself. She recalled that same reined-in fury from the previous evening.

That gentleman she'd met at Almack's yesterday night – he'd been as angry when she'd lost him in the crowd! She laughed.

"It served him right," she said to herself.

He struck her as arrogant, and she reckoned he'd needed the punishment that being hounded all evening would be. At the same time, though, she had seen something in those dark eyes she'd liked. For a moment, she'd seen genuine eagerness and a keen mind. He had been able to joke and to bear her prank admirably, and she had to appreciate this.

She went to the wall to the bell to summon Henriette, feeling chilly and needing to get dressed and take a meal. She had gone to bed so late last night, and she felt weary still – some tea and toast would certainly be welcomed.

"Morning, My Lady," Henriette greeted her, wearing in a dark dress, her dark hair neatly drawn back from her lively, pretty face.

"Morning, Henriette," Marlena replied. "I'd like to dress for breakfast. Something simple, I think. I don't think Charles plans for us to see anyone or go out this morning." She glanced at the window again, tiredly. A nice day at home would be just what she needed.

"Very good. The green?"

"The one with the little patterns? Yes. I think that will do well."

Marlena liked plainer dresses and wasn't usually fussy about what she wore, but in its own way, it was a pleasure to be able to wear white and other colours than black, grey, and navy blue.

It had been a year since James' passing, and she felt good to be wearing ordinary clothes. Her mind had barely begun to comprehend it. She still could barely think of James – it was too painful. But she had finally convinced Papa to let her and the family return to London.

She had to do everything she could to discover what had happened.

“Will you go to the park, do you think?” Henriette asked. She was busy taking shoes and other things out of the wardrobe.

Marlena tilted her head. “I'm not sure,” she said. “We might do. Charles likes being outside.”

“I'm sure.” Henriette nodded. She hated the city, missing her green leafy Kentish countryside. Marlena knew that. Henriette had been raised in a village that was far even from her own manor home, Halford Park. She missed the countryside, so she imagined Henriette would miss it even more sorely.

“Well, if we go to the park, I shall need you to come along,” she said, thinking of Henriette and how tedious it must be for her to be stuck in the house almost the whole day. “Charles is grand company, but he always ends up in a crowd of military types, and then I need someone else to accompany me anywhere.”

She grinned to herself. She would have been talking to Charles yesterday night, except that he ended up talking to his friends from the army, and she'd wondered off. She frowned to herself. She would never have met the annoying but handsome man had she stayed talking to her brother.

It surprised her that she thought of him as handsome. She blushed but was interrupted from her reverie by Henriette, who was clearly pleased by the prospect of going to the park.

“My Lady! It'd be grand to go to the park. I can't wait.”

Marlena smiled. “Well, then, we shall certainly go, whether Charles wishes to attend or not.”

Henriette grinned. She was a firm friend – she had worked for the family since Marlena was sixteen, just over three years. Marlena was very fond of her and, even if Henriette had a rather quieter nature than her own, she also had uncompromising strength. She always supported Marlena, whether her behaviour was unconventional or not, and she encouraged Marlena in her desire to find out the truth about her brother's passing.

“I think I'd like my hair arranged simply today if you please,” she said to Henriette. She was sitting before the looking glass, and Henriette brushed Marlena's long brown hair, rolling it into a neat bun and tucking some pins into it to hold it in place. Marlena surveyed her appearance. She couldn't help thinking about the man from Almack's ballroom.

He had looked at her with such admiration as if she were beautiful.

She blushed. Strangely, that was a new experience for her. She'd had her debut two years ago when she was seventeen but had never really noticed if the men at Almack's looked at her admiringly or not. She had been too busy taking note of their characters – whether or not she could converse with them, whether or not they struck her as nice people. She didn't dance much, and she had privately concluded she must be plain-looking.

Until yesterday, when that man looked at her like that.

She blushed pink. She shouldn't be thinking like this about him! He was a stranger, and she didn't even know his name. Why was it that he kept on returning to her head?

"That looks nice, thank you," she said to Henriette, glancing at her hairstyle. It was a plain bun; her brown hair pulled back from her face. She had never noticed that she had a nice forehead before or that her eyes were wide and striking blue.

She blushed again, thinking that she really must stop thinking about this man and that it shouldn't make her feel so much prettier just because someone else paid her interest. He had stared at her, and she couldn't help admitting she'd liked it.

Henriette shrugged. "Well, then. I reckon you're ready to go down to breakfast."

"Thank you," Marlena said. She looked down at herself, her body clad in the white gown decorated with green sprigs. She could feel the cool

muslin against her legs, and she thought the dress suited her – the green colour brought out the blue of her eyes.

She waved to Henriette and went swiftly down the hallway to the breakfast room.

Her feet, quiet on the wooden floors, she glanced at the white walls, lit with lamps, though the day was not particularly dark. She went down towards where she could smell the scent of tea and kedgerree, thinking that she had already become accustomed to the house though they had been in London only three days.

“Morning, Charles,” she greeted her brother, sitting at the breakfast table, the *Gazette* propped up on his knee. He looked over, smilingly.

“Good morning, sister,” he said. His handsome face was calm, gaze level. He seemed as though he’d slept soundly eight hours. “I trust you enjoyed last night.”

Marlena grinned. She nodded. “It was not bad,” she said.

“Not too bad?” Her brother chuckled. “My dear Marlena! You sound as though you have been stuck in coach traffic and enjoyed it more.”

Marlena made a face. “The analogy isn’t far wrong, brother. But yes, it was truly not bad ... the music was good; there were friendly people to talk with, and I got away with not having to dance more than twice. I think it was a successful ball.”

Charles laughed. “Marlena, dear ... I do wish you would enjoy balls more.”

Marlena looked at her breakfast. She had been helping herself to a slice of toast with marmalade. She focused on that rather than on what Charles said. She knew he wished for her to enjoy balls so that she would meet people her own age – particularly young lords and gentlemen who might seek permission for courting her.

Charles was a good self-appointed guardian.

“I wish I could enjoy balls, too,” she commented. Her former cheerful humour returned, and she felt one eyebrow rise. “It would make it a lot easier to attend as many of the things as I must.”

Charles chuckled. “Sister, you are right. I apologise. Maybe a salon will be more tolerable for you. I believe we are attending tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes. I almost forgot,” Marlena agreed. “At three of the clock, is that correct?”

“Absolutely.” Charles nodded. “I’m sorry I will be out most of the day, but I’ll be back in plenty of time to escort you. Should you wish to go elsewhere, you’ll need Henriette as your chaperone.”

“Yes, brother,” Marlena agreed.

They sat quietly, and Marlana bit into her toast, thick with marmalade. She tasted the rich, sweet flavour and thought about her plans for the day. She would certainly be going to the park. She found her thoughts wandering to the gentleman she'd met the previous evening and felt a smile lift the corner of her mouth. She hastily schooled her face to neutral, in case Charles should notice.

She had a sense that he would not approve of the young fellow.

She had to admit, as far as character went, she wasn't certain of her opinion, either. She didn't like his arrogance – she wasn't even sure what it was he did that made her think he was arrogant. It was just something about his attitude that had struck her as the kind of brittle coldness that hid insecurities.

“Marlena, sister?” Charles asked, making her jump. “Sorry. I just wanted to ask if you will be going out today? I have a busy afternoon planned. Mr Marwell is going to be here to discuss the accounts. I know, I hate it, too ... but I need to be there. Papa asked if I would sit with him today. It's easier for him – and for me – if I take over the accounts.”

“I understand,” Marlana agreed. She didn't want to think about her papa and his health – he had a bad incident with his health a few years ago, and the recent shock had affected him. She knew Charles was here in London mainly because their parents needed him.

“So, will you stay here today?” he asked. “I'm sure there are plenty of diversions in London that even you might like to attend instead.”

She chuckled. “I'm not that fussy, am I?” she asked. “Well, mayhap.

And yes, I had thought perhaps Henriette might accompany me to Hyde Park. We would both benefit from taking the air.”

“Of course, my dear sister,” Charles said. He leaned back in his chair, smiling fondly. “And should you need anything, I’ll be up in the drawing room. It’s going to be a tedious morning.”

She smiled. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she said. “I can only imagine how tedious it must be.”

He chuckled. “Trust me ... it’s not too bad. I just sit back and imagine the sea. It’s ever so restful.”

Marlena was still laughing about that when the butler arrived to summon Charles downstairs to meet Mr Marwell. She leaned back in her chair and looked up at the ceiling, feeling strangely excited about the trip outdoors.

She went upstairs to change and to fetch Henriette – they might as well go out now since Charles would clearly be busy all morning, and she might have a chance of seeing him when he came out of the meeting.

“Henriette?” she called at the door. She thought she might be in there cleaning.

“My Lady?”

“I wanted to get dressed to go out,” Marlena explained to her maid, who was tidying her dressing table. “The accountant is keeping Charles busy all morning, so we could go to the park now if we so chose.”

“Hurrah!” Henriette sounded excited. “Will we be out long, My Lady?”

Marlena shrugged. “It depends on if we meet anyone in the park,” she said. “But I am sure we will return here for luncheon.”

“Grand, My Lady,” Henriette said. “Then let me help you dress. Will you be changing your outfit this morning?”

“Mayhap,” Marlena allowed, going to check her reflection. She thought the dress was suitable for a walk outdoors – a sensible day dress, one that was pretty and fashionable. She just couldn’t decide if it looked good on her.

She blushed, thinking about meeting the young man from last night. She felt her cheeks go red as she realised what a strong impression he must have made upon her.

“No, thank you, Henriette,” she said after a long moment. “I will wear this dress. If you could fetch my white bonnet? And I think my cloak is downstairs. We will need those, I reckon – it seems to be a bit of an unusually cold wind outdoors.”

“Yes, My Lady. I’ll fetch it directly. And my cloak from upstairs ... I’ll be needing it.”

“Very sensible,” Marlena agreed.

Henriette went out with a grin in the direction of the stairs, and Marlena stood in her chamber, thinking about the day. She felt surprised by the fact that she hoped to meet the man from the previous night. She had come here with no thoughts like that – her only purpose in London was to find out more about James and his last week here. But now, when she thought of that man, her mood lifted, and she wanted to smile.

“That’s foolish,” she told herself, but she was still grinning as she heard Henriette’s feet come down the hallway towards the bedroom.

Whoever he was – she had no idea who he was right now – he had certainly given her much to consider, but she still didn’t really understand what he made her heart feel.

Chapter 3

A morning and a new acquaintance

It felt bright in the street, though it wasn't particularly less cloudy than usual. Ryan walked alongside Jasper, feeling surprisingly frustrated with his friend and even more so with himself.

"Jasper ... you must have." Ryan felt annoyed. He had been asking Jasper all morning, with tedious regularity, whether he knew anything about the girl he'd met yesterday. Apparently, he hadn't seen Ryan with her all evening.

"Unfortunately, no," Jasper said. He looked at his friend, a small smile lifting the corners of his mouth fondly. "I didn't see any mysterious brown-haired, blue-eyed ladies you talked to yesterday at the ball. Was that before or after I went to talk to Lord Rockley and his group?"

"Just after," Ryan said firmly. "About ten minutes after."

Jasper shook his head. "I didn't see her, unfortunately. What was it that caught your interest?"

Ryan blinked. "What do you mean?" He felt affronted. Was it so unusual for him to like somebody? He swallowed, realising that it was.

Jasper grinned. “Just that there were a dozen beautiful young ladies you talked to yesterday – I saw them, and any one of them could be described as arresting or admirable – and yet this one, particularly, has you demanding of all of us who were there if we happened to notice her?”

Ryan looked away. He knew it was unusual. He had a habit of acting disinterest, even when something caught his attention, thinking it made him look jaded and sophisticated. Last night, he had seen someone with true confidence, though, and that had shaken him out of his cool, aloof act.

“Yes, I liked her,” he admitted.

Jasper laughed. “That’s a fellow! Well, I wish I had the delight of spotting her.” He gestured ahead. They had been walking down a crowded street and had arrived outside the club Jasper frequented. “Shall we enter? I reckon maybe Rockley and his crowd are here, and they could tell us who was there. If anybody might have seen your mysterious beauty, perhaps they did.”

Ryan swallowed. He was not, oddly, the sort of person who often attended gentlemen’s clubs. He pretended to be. He actually found he disliked the dark, smokey interiors where people crowded to talk about racing, boxing, and other things that didn’t really hold much appeal. But, since he was a duke and a member of the ton, it was expected, and so he did it, even against his judgement.

“Yes,” he said. “Mayhap they will.”

He went in through the big doors, Jasper nodding to the footman who stood at the entrance. His friend was clearly recognised as someone

who came often, and Ryan walked in beside him, feeling uneasy.

He looked around. It was dark in there, as he had expected, and the big leather seats at the tables looked just as stiff as he might have guessed. Two other people were in there, sitting at a table and playing a card game. Ryan noticed Jasper incline his head to them and guessed he knew at least one of the gentlemen.

“Exterfield,” he greeted one of the men warmly. “How are you this morning? Did you enjoy the ball?”

Exterfield – a pale man with pale brown hair – yawned. “Quite thoroughly,” he said. “So much so that I can barely wake up.”

Jasper laughed. “Grand. May we join you?”

Ryan tensed. He had wanted to spend the morning talking with Jasper – he hardly ever had a chance to see him nowadays. He and Jasper were both so busy, and the rare moments Jasper had alone, he spent with Adeline. Ryan looked sullenly at the other two gentlemen, but when they shrugged and shifted so that Jasper could sit down, he sat alongside.

“We were playing whist,” Exterfield said. He gestured at the table. “Want to play? I was winning, but I reckon we can start again.”

The other gentleman laughed. “Most happily.”

They all laughed, and Ryan leaned back, surprised that he was feeling relaxed. He usually hated this sort of company. He grinned to himself – he was so distracted, thinking about the lady from Almack's Assembly, that he barely had time to maintain his usual act of disgruntlement.

“So, Your Grace,” the other man greeted him. “We’ve not been introduced. I’m Alfred Hadley.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Ryan said. He surprised himself. It was so unlike him to be so friendly, to shake hands with strangers so informally. “I am Ryan Wellston.” He didn’t add “His Grace, Duke of Claypool,” because if the young man had addressed him as “Your Grace” already, he clearly knew. He glanced at Jasper, who was leaning back, a glass of something in one hand. He was surprised at how quickly Jasper had relaxed and accustomed himself to the place, the company, and the cards.

He looked around, feeling unsettled again. He needed to know who the young girl he’d talked to was, but he was starting to feel awkward about asking. He couldn’t very well just ask everyone until he found someone who remembered her. It would look silly. He looked at Jasper, who was studying his cards with intent. At least his friend wouldn’t be listening.

“Are you here for the Season?” Alfred asked him, making him blink with surprise. Usually, people didn’t approach him or talk to him so readily.

He nodded. “I am.” He looked down at his cards, realising it was his turn. He selected a card at random and heard someone swear under their breath. He was surprised when he noticed he’d actually chosen rather well.

“Having a good time?” Alfred asked him.

Ryan made a hesitant face. “I suppose it’s nice.” He hated the Season – he only participated because Marlford said he had to. He knew it was his duty to father the next duke, but it wasn’t something he ever thought about. He was enjoying this Season well enough, oddly, though.

Remembering how much he’d enjoyed last night’s ball brought him back to the topic that had been on his mind all day. “Were you at Almack’s Assembly yesterday evening?” he asked, watching Alfred’s face carefully, intent on his answer and on asking him the next question – about the nameless lady.

“I was,” Alfred said, inclining his head agreeably. “I danced a fair old bit – didn’t see you there. Did you attend too?”

“I did,” Ryan agreed. He felt a little upset – he had danced rather a lot. Well, five whole dances, to be precise. But he was sure that if Alfred had been there, he would have seen him at some point. He put his annoyance aside and drew a breath. “Did you notice a particular young lady? One in a white gown, with brown hair and blue eyes?”

He heard a chuckle from Jasper, but his friend was only commenting on the cards. He felt glad that Jasper hadn’t been listening to him. If he heard him ask about the mystery girl again, he would certainly chuckle.

Alfred shrugged. “Can’t say I did, old chap. Ah! Look. Randall! There you are! Come on and join us! We’re playing already – you can get a

drink there from the footman ... maybe you can answer this mystery question for us."

Ryan turned to see who had arrived. A tall man was walking in, grey-haired with a strong face, quite appealing-looking in a cool, assured way. He was tall, slim, and had piercing dark eyes. Ryan guessed he must be at least twenty years his senior. He shifted on the bench as the man came to join them.

"Good morning, Alfred," he greeted him. He nodded to Ryan. "Good morning. Let me sit here, so I can at least introduce myself." He grinned at him in a friendly way. Alfred moved up so the man could settle beside him. "What question is this?" he added.

Ryan looked over at the man, wondering about him. He was interested to meet him, which in a morning full of surprises, was just another. He glanced at Alfred, wondering if he was going to make an introduction.

Alfred nodded. "Well, I'll do the introductions first, Randall. The question involves a mysterious lady. Your Grace, I would like to introduce my friend. May I present the honourable Mr Randall Newford. He is the brother of Viscount Atfield." He cleared his throat. "Randall, this is His Grace, the Duke of Clayford."

"Pleased to meet you." Ryan inclined his head, surprised when the older man shook his hand firmly, his smile lighting up.

"You must be the child of Leeson. Is that right?"

Ryan nodded. It sounded so strange to hear his father referred to by

name. He drew a breath.

“You were acquainted with him?”

“Acquainted! We frequented the same club!” The older man shook his head, a smile on his face as if he was looking into the former years when he and the duke had been friends. “I am so surprised to meet his son. His only son, am I right?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. He felt awkward. This was a friend of his father! He wanted to hear everything he had to say about the previous duke, but he had no idea how to ask him. “I am his only child.”

“I see.” Randall nodded. He tilted his head to one side, studying Ryan. “I was sorry to hear of his passing.”

Ryan nodded. “It was many years ago. But I still think of him, and I thank you.” He was surprised to notice that his voice ached with feelings. He had thought he was far from mourning for his father, but meeting this man reminded him of the man he had lost.

“Now,” Randall said, leaning back in his chair, “what was this mystery? I do love a good mystery.”

Ryan grinned. He was shy now, aware that Jasper and Exterfield were listening, too. He cleared his throat. “I won’t ask anyone else after this,” he said by way of introduction, “but I met a young lady the night before at Almack’s. I have been trying all day to learn her identity. Nobody so far remembers her from the ball. I have one question – were you there?”

“No,” Randall said, and Ryan felt rather upset.

“Well,” Randall said, one brow raised. “What is it, then? I might not have been there, but yet I might know this lady. Tell us of her – I am sure I am not the only one wanting to know by now.”

Ryan cleared his throat. “Well, all I know is what she looked like – that she is shorter than me by perhaps a hand’s length, that she had brown hair and blue eyes and was wearing a white silk dress.” He saw Alfred grin. “Yes, I know, half the ladies at Almack’s can be relied on to wear white. But those are the only facts I can use to identify her.” He looked hopefully at everyone at the table.

Randall shrugged. “I’m afraid I know no such lady. I can only encourage you to search well. If you were so taken with her, I feel sure there must be something special about her.”

Ryan smiled. He was pleased to have this assurance, especially from an older man he felt must know more than himself.

He gave him a thankful glance. “Thank you for your encouragement.” He cast a look around the table at the others, wanting to make it clear that they had been less than interested in assisting him.

Randall shrugged. He gestured to the footman, wanting a drink. “I know a few things, young man. One of them is that if anything tickles your fancy, then you should pay attention.”

Ryan smiled. He wanted to say that the young lady had done more than that – she had interested him considerably. But he was too shy.

“A glass of port wine?” the footman asked Randall, who shrugged.

“Bit early, eh?” he asked.

Ryan nodded. “I suppose so, sir.”

Randall smiled. “That’s a good fellow! Well, no, thank you. I’ll take a drink later.”

Ryan felt surprised and impressed by the older man. He wanted to hear more about him and especially to hear more about the previous duke, his own father. He rarely met people who had known him, and it was always wonderful to hear their stories of him. It made him seem closer to Ryan somehow. He took a breath, about to ask him a question, but Alfred was passing him his cards.

“I’ll sit out the next round,” he said. “I’ve played too much today.”

Ryan looked down at his cards, feeling pleased that Randall would stay. He passed them to Alfred, who was ready to deal the next round. Randall accepted a hand and started to play.

Ryan found his thoughts drifting from his father to the mysterious lady. He wondered where she was. He wondered, too, if the

interaction between them had made any impression on her. Maybe she had just enjoyed leaving him stranded in the ballroom and had forgotten about him.

He looked up as Randall stood, adjusting his jacket. "I must go," he said. "My apologies – I forgot about a silly meeting with my solicitor." He shook his head as if managing his money was tiresome. Ryan grinned at that. "I was so pleased to be able to talk with you," he said.

"Thank you, sir," Ryan said warmly.

He stood as Randall left, and so did the others. He found he wasn't too interested in playing, and neither were the others if the desultory way they put cards on the table was any indication. He was not surprised when Alfred stood up a few moments later.

"I should probably go too," he said. "I should settle something with my accountant. Some bill I can finally pay now."

"Grand."

Jasper smiled at Alfred and, as they stood when he left, Ryan glanced at him.

"Should we go?" he asked.

Jasper shrugged. "I reckon so," he said. "I feel the need to walk this morning – I suppose if I don't keep moving, I'll fall asleep."

Ryan had to smile. “Well, then. Let’s go outside. I wouldn’t mind walking down the road, either. There were some interesting shops on the way.” He didn’t really need anything, but it was always nice to look. One good thing about London was the possibility to obtain things – gloves, cravats, and that sort – without having to search far and wide. There were a few streets where there were so many shops one was almost certain to find whatever one sought.

He walked with Jasper out of the club.

It was a cool morning, and he was glad of his hat and coat. He walked along, listening to Jasper telling a story about his last trip to check something in his accounts. He wasn’t really paying attention to anything, thinking about what he might ask Randall next time he saw him.

He couldn’t help being delighted by the fact that he’d met someone who knew his father! He recalled his father’s portrait when he almost walked into somebody. A coach had stopped at the side of the street, and two people climbed out. He blinked as he looked at the girl he had walked into.

“You!” he said.

The mystery lady raised a brow. “It’s you! Well, that is a surprise.” She made a face, and he had to laugh.

“My Lady, you seem somewhat unsurprised.”

“Surprised? I certainly am. Perhaps one should bear in mind that surprises come in many sorts.”

He chuckled. “My Lady! You are refreshing. I have been here two weeks and have met nobody who says exactly what they think, so eloquently.”

“Thank you. I find it advantageous to say what I think. It makes things less complex.”

He nodded. His face was transformed with a smile. He couldn’t keep from grinning. He glanced down the pavement to where Jasper was standing, a few feet away. He was talking to a fellow who was pointing at a shop, and Ryan was grateful that he hadn’t noticed his preoccupation. There was a woman with the mysterious lady; he guessed her to be a chaperone. He inclined his head politely, and the woman curtsied.

“My Lady,” he said. “I must say your method of speaking your mind is to be emulated. I wish I could so easily tell you what was in my thoughts.”

“You may,” she said, a smile on her lips. “I am sure that it will not be so shocking.”

He laughed. “I assure you, My Lady. It is not shocking. I simply wish I knew you better.”

She raised a brow. “You have already learned one fact – that I speak my mind. I declare, you know me better by half again than you did a moment before.”

He was grinning. She had a truly wonderful way of speaking. She said so much, and at the same time, he ached to know actual fact. Who was she? Why was she here? What was it that made her keep her identity secret? He was determined to know more about her, and he found himself walking along with her, all three of them going towards where Jasper strolled to the shops the fellow he’d been talking with had shown him.

“My Lady,” he said. “I know that I know so much compared to a moment ago. But I still ache for one piece of information – I know not your name.”

She raised a brow. “If we meet for a third time, I shall tell you.”

Ryan let out a sigh. “Why can you not just tell me now?”

She tilted her head. “If you tell me your name, there is no harm in it for you. If I tell you my name, my reputation depends on trusting you. And I do not even know as much about you as you do about me.”

Ryan nodded. He felt stupid. He should have thought of that. He could hear what that meant for her. He cleared his throat, trying to think of something to say, something that might serve to make him seem like a responsible person. He could think of nothing to say, and by the time he had decided what he might reply, she had managed to step neatly around the crowd that thronged in front of them and eluded him.

“Dash it.”

He looked for her, but he couldn't spot her, and he thought that she must have taken advantage of his confused state and slipped into one of the streets running off the main road. He glanced around, but there were so many ladies in white bonnets that he couldn't spot her. He saw Jasper standing on the roadside and went across to him, feeling shy.

“I was talking to the girl from last night,” he said as he went to where he waited so patiently across the street from them. “She just happened to be here.” He looked at Jasper. “I asked her for her name this time.”

“Grand.” Jasper smiled. He could see genuine fondness in his friend's face, and he thought he approved. “Well, I'm so pleased that you had the chance to do that. And I hope you will take your card around soon.”

“I didn't *get* her name. She wouldn't tell it to me. She said she wouldn't because she has no idea of who I am as a person.”

Jasper nodded. “I suppose that makes sense,” he said fairly. “You have to admit you might do the same, should you be a young woman instead of a young man.”

Ryan tilted his head in agreement. “Yes,” he said. “I suppose.”

He tried to fight down the longing he felt – wanting to run back the way they had come and seek her out. He couldn't believe he had a

chance of finding out who she was, and he had managed it so badly! He wished he could find her so that finally he might find out her name.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He was in London, and there were not so many gentry and nobles, and so the chance of seeing her again must be great – he had to believe that.

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